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BY
Jean Middlemass



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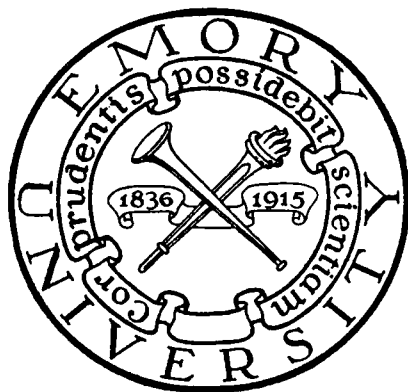
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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY, W.

TOUCH AND GO

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BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS

AUTHOR OF "MR. DORILLION," ETC.



A NEW EDITION

London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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TOUCH AND GO.

CHAPTER I.

OLD PETER.

"HALLO, Peter ! What, still in the land of the living ? Glad to see you hale and hearty. Familiar faces are always welcome."

The lodge-keeper eyed the speaker narrowly and craftily, but evidently failed to recognize him ; so he opened the gate, and, lifting the hat he always wore even in the house, said shortly—

"The family is abroad, sir."

"The deuce they are ! That is just like my cursed bad luck. When are they likely to return ?"

"Don't know, sir — maybe soon, maybe not for months."

"Humph. And you, Peter, how have you been all these years ?"

"Nicely, sir, thank you." And Peter lowered his brow and looked up at his interrogator from underneath his hat, as though he were searching in memory for the time and place when and where he had seen him before.

"I don't believe you know me, after all," said the stranger cheerily, throwing himself off his horse as he spoke, and standing beside the old man.

"Well, sir, it's best to be out with the truth at once—I don't. You must blame my memory, for it is getting a bit confused."

"Yet we have had more than one adventure together. Has all recollection of the dam down by the old mill slipped from your mind as well as my features? Here, boy, come and hold my horse," he shouted, turning away from Peter and looking in the direction of a lad who was working at some little distance; thus the expression of the old man's face escaped his observation. It was one in which fear and hatred were strangely commingled; but in a moment it took a brighter, healthier turn, and he seized the newcomer by the hand.

"Master Harry!" he cried out. "And to think I did not know ye!"

"Well, I am scarcely surprised. It is many a year since we parted. I was a beardless stripling in those days, eh, Peter? So my cousins at the house are abroad? Hold my horse steadily, boy. And now, old friend, let us adjourn into your quarters and have a chat."

With tottering steps Old Peter led the way; in fact, so shaky and feeble had he suddenly become that if the stranger had not held out his hand to support him he would have fallen on his own doorstep.

Old Peter has scarcely passed the three score years and ten which Scripture assigns as the allotted term of human life; and though his intellect is keen and unimpaired as it had been in the heyday of his youth, yet he is bent in frame, and his physical powers are feeble as those of a man whom much labour, perhaps a share, too, of bitter vexation, have worn out before his time. He cannot stand the toil and the wear and tear of work as he used to do, and even in the days of early autumn may be seen bending over a cheerful wood-fire, as though to obtain from it some of the caloric which has become exhausted in his spent body. For hours previous to the stranger's arrival he has

been crouching over it, spreading out his bony fleshless fingers above the flames. Though the last rays of a gorgeous sunset are dancing with their glad light aslant the tiny casement-panes of his room, the old man heeds them not, but seems engrossed, gazing in his fire, as though he read old tales among the ashen embers. Half kitchen, half parlour, the room in which he was constantly to be seen sitting on his settle is clean and trim and comfortable. There is no carpet, but the polished floor is without a blemish, the well-rubbed table without a spot or stain, while on the high mantelshelf over the fireplace is many a quaint specimen of crockery, such as used to be found plentifully in the cottages of the poor before the *bric-à-brac* lovers, so numerous as they have become in our days, made a raid upon the entire rural population and bought up at meagre prices every cup that was worth their attention. But Peter has held on by his treasures; and not only on the mantelshelf but among the ordinary utensils for daily use not a few specimens of queer old English relics will be found, if the connoisseurs ever have a chance of rummaging among the contents of the "old lodge." For many years now Peter has lived there as principal gate-keeper to the family at Swinton Hall. He has seen more than one generation pass away, and if it were possible to unlock the old man's lips, strange are the tales he could tell, not only of the lives of the "grand folk" with whom he has come in contact, but of his own particular interest and share in more than one eventful episode. But, crabbed, sarcastic, and silent by nature, the past with Old Peter is a sealed book; he never refers to it to any one, but surely he dwells on it in spirit while he sits for hours gazing thoughtfully into the fire?

It is a lonely existence enough to live thus through long weary years, with some bitter unspoken memories for ever rankling within, and drying up the sap of that peace and hope which should have been the comfort and solace

of the worn man's declining years. Yet his life is not entirely without a joy, for—

“Still the little flower bloomed,
And still it lived and throve;
And men do call it summer-growth,
But the angels call it ‘Love.’”

Yes, Peter, the lodge-keeper, has his one floweret still; and even while he sits dreaming by the fire, the click of the gate-latch rouses him, and his joy bounds with a light step and merry laugh into the room. It is a fully blown, warm-tinted flower, this exotic of his, and it seems to fill the whole place with gorgeous colouring and sparkling brilliancy as it blooms suddenly on the silent scene.

“What, sleeping as usual, grand-dad! And never even got the cups ready for tea! I verily believe you would starve yourself to death if I were not to look after you.”

“Ay, Cicely, I should be lost without you, child, and that is the truth. And yet you cannot bide always in this poor lodge—more's the pity.”

“As long as you live, grand-dad, I will bide here, and for the rest God will provide.” And there came a shade over the girl's bright face which had not been upon it when she entered the room.

“It won't be long, Cis, it won't be long, and perhaps God *will* provide; though it is dreary work trusting to Providence, child. He has not always provided—not always. But no matter—let the past rest.”

“Now you are a very naughty grand-dad to talk like that. I shall bring the vicar to lecture you, if you will not mind me.”

“No vicars here, Cicely, mind you, child; no vicars, if you would not anger me—I have had enough of them.” And there was an amount of asperity in the old man's tone which he but rarely displayed to his grand-daughter.

“The vicar is very good to me, daddy. I don't know why you should be so severe on him.”

"No matter, child. Learn what the vicar has to teach you—men say he is truthful and upright—but don't let him darken my doors."

"He knows as well as I do that you dislike him, granddad, and I am sure he is very sorry about it."

"Is he? And has he been whining over his troubles to you? Parsons don't like sheep that won't follow the flock. It takes from their power. Oh! I know them of old."

"Oh, daddy, dear daddy, don't be hard and cross. Only one little fault have you got, my darling old daddy: that you will not believe in other people's goodness. You make every one out to be so wicked; and I do so like to think that everybody is good and kind and loving—just what I should wish them to be."

"Bah! Too much belief is a young girl's folly, child, and generally ends in being a woman's curse. Believe nothing, trust no one, if you would not be——"

But he turned from her as though unable to finish the sentence, and asked abruptly for his tea.

The girl he called Cicely took off the large sun hat of coarse straw which had till now partially shaded her features, and stood for a moment or two looking at him in surprise. It was not often that Old Peter evinced emotion on any subject; his remarks were usually terse and dry, and the change in his humour evidently astonished his grand-daughter. He did not, however, look round at her again, and she walked away into a back room without speaking. Soon, having apparently forgotten her momentary surprise, she busied herself arranging the cups and saucers for their afternoon meal, humming carelessly the while. Light of heart and full of hope, there are no painful memories to shake her faith and trust. Her flashing eyes have as yet been undimmed by a tear, the bright warm blood that mantles her peach-like cheeks has never yet been blanched by the outburst of some strong surging passion; yet the quick change of colouring, the warm glow

even of her early maiden beauty, denote the strong undercurrent of feeling which is latent in that young frame, and which wise or evil counsellors may perchance one day mould as they will, according as Cicely's heart-promptings induce her to listen and be directed. Impressionable by nature, to her heart and not her head must those who are interested in her welfare trust, for that she will follow its instincts only there is little doubt; and Old Peter, sitting morose and taciturn on his wooden settle, perhaps knows it better than most—ay, dreads it more than he would care to acknowledge in spoken words. They have lived together alone at the lodge since Cicely was a mere child; she can, at all events, remember no other home nor form any conjecture whence she came to this one. A poor woman arrives daily from the village "to tidy up a bit and make things comfortable for the child," as Old Peter expresses it; but she is deaf and dumb, so Cicely is not likely to get much information from her, nor does any one else seem either willing or able to tell her. True, happy in the life her grandfather, with all his moroseness, tries to make bright for her, she does not often ask; yet from the fulness of that large heart of hers sometimes the cry will force itself, "Oh, why have I not a mother, like the rest of the children I see, to share my griefs and joys?" But the temporary feeling passes, and Cicely carols with the birds, frolics with the young lambs, and is content for the nonce to love her grand-dad and that fair nature which, pregnant in beauty, lies all around her as she wanders through the Swinton woods far out into the uplands beyond. Strongly prejudiced as Old Peter is against the clergy, yet he has ceded a point and sent Cicely to be "taught book-learning" by the vicar; but though she goes to please her grand-dad, and because the vicar is kind to her, yet education by contact is the only mode of tuition that will ever reach her. Printed phrases seem to pass from her mind as soon as read, while on nature's book she

is never tired of dwelling. Will she not, in the future which has yet to dawn for her, crave that abundance of brightness, warmth, and artistic beauty which riches alone carry in their wake?

Still she is only a lodge-keeper's grand-daughter! What matter? Look at her, as she flits about the room arranging the old man's tea, and say if Hebe herself possessed a greater charm, or whether she, with her full rich beauty, will, as Old Peter himself has said, "bide on in the lodge for long."

They are sitting together, now, the old man and the young girl, and the two heads, with their quaint surroundings, form a picture which a painter might aspire to reproduce on canvas. Few words are spoken, for old Peter has dropped again almost into a state of reverie, when the shout of "Gate!" rouses him, and he starts up.

"The family away—who can this stranger be?" he mutters, as he hobbles out in the pursuit of his calling.

The stranger, who had given Peter his arm up the steps of the lodge, was a handsome-looking man, bronzed and bearded as though he had been lately in foreign parts. Of his age it were difficult to speak, as, except a pair of keen sharp eyes, little of his face was to be seen save brown hair.

Having conducted Peter to his settle by the fire, he turned to Cicely, who was standing blushing and wondering by the window as they entered the little parlour together; and her cheeks became suddenly redder than the peony itself when the new-comer exclaimed—

"Good God, Peter! why, who is this?"

The old man's only answer was a moan as he leant forward and hid his face in his hands.

The man he had called "Master Harry" looked from one to the other in astonishment; and then, finding Peter gave him no answer, he addressed the girl.

"What is your name, my child?"

"Cicely, please sir," she answered, shyly, dropping a little curtsy.

"Cicely what?"

But before she had time to reply the old man roused himself.

"Don't torment the girl with questions. Run out, lass, run out and take a walk before supper time. I have some private business with this gentleman."

Cicely moved towards the door to obey her grandfather's bidding. The stranger opened it for her and bowed his head as she passed, as though he were the most abject of her slaves and she a grand-duchess at the least.

CHAPTER II.

GLIMPSES.

CICELY having been dismissed for awhile from attendance on her grandfather, sped with the swiftness of a young deer through a tiny copse adjoining the gates of Swinton Park, and a pathway from which led to a village about a quarter of a mile off. She hoped to find some playmates yet lingering over their games on the village green, for, though now past her seventeenth birthday, she had not attained that period when, the woman having taken the place of the girl, puerile amusements pall and are regarded as trivial and inane. None of the dew had been dashed off Cicely's bud of life, and as after her swift run through the wood she arrived breathless and flushed among her companions, the exclamations of joy with which they hailed her advent showed that the gaiety and spirit of the merry throng received an impetus when Cicely came, and that she was the reigning queen on the village green. "How

have you managed to get out at this hour? We thought your grandfather always kept you at home in the evening. Tell us how you came here," were questions with which she was assailed on all sides.

And when, between pauses to recover her breath, she informed them that a strange gentleman was closeted with her grandfather, still greater seemed the astonishment of the youthful villagers. Swinton was a quiet peaceable place, and strangers were but little known in it. True, when the great family at the Hall was at home people came and went more frequently, but they had been travelling for the last two years or more, and since they had left no incident of any note had befallen to afford food for the village gossips, save the very ordinary ones of their own agricultural and laborious life. To every one, children included, Old Peter was a mystery; and on the rare occasions when he appeared in the village he was treated with an amount of respect and reverence which denoted that the good folk scarcely accepted him as one of themselves. Of late, however, they had ceased to discuss him and his affairs, and nothing had occurred to create fresh surmises or new wonder till the advent of this stranger. Sure enough they had all seen him ride through the village; but the children's curiosity was the first to be gratified by the announcement that he was actually in Peter's cottage, in intimate and serious conversation with him, and that Cicely had been sent right away that she might not interfere with their talk. The young bright inquiring faces were all round her, asking her countless questions, which she was utterly at a loss to answer; for what so dear to a rural population as an incident and a stranger? And well each of those young people knew the severe examination they would undergo anent Peter's guest on their return to their several homes. Suddenly, however, their chatter is brought to a cessation by the approach of no less important an individual than the vicar. He has

been taking advantage of the lovely autumnal evening to indulge in a stroll; and seeing several members of the juvenile portion of his flock in earnest conversation, he saunters amongst them almost before they are aware of his presence.

"Why, children, what grave and important matters are usurping your attention that you have left off your games to discuss them?" he asks, as he places his hand on a curly pate.

The vicar is beloved and by no means feared by the younger community, yet no one is ready with an answer; the babel which has existed for the last few minutes suddenly ceases, and there is a dead silence.

"So," he continues, smiling, "then, I am not to be permitted to penetrate this mighty secret? Well, I suppose I may trust you that it is no mischief your young brains are concocting."

The vicar was of the Arnold school—he governed his flock by believing in them, and giving them more or less the power and knowledge how to govern and control themselves and each other.

"Indeed, sir, it is not mischief," cried out Cicely—from being the vicar's pupil she was more accustomed to address him than the other children: "it is just that a strange gentleman has arrived at grandfather's, and we are all wondering who he can be."

"And very inquisitive of you youngsters. What can Old Peter's friends have to do with you?"

"Oh, he is not a friend of grand-dad's. Please, sir, he is quite a gentleman, with ever such a long beard—I never saw any one like him before."

"And you do not know where he has come from?" Was the vicar forgetful of his reproof and becoming curious too?

"No, that I don't," cried Cicely; "only he rode a lovely horse. He asked me my name, and seemed so

surprised to see me there! It's queer, isn't it, sir, that grand-dad should have such a grand visitor, and that he should know anything about me?"

The vicar evidently thought as Cicely did, though it was scarcely fitting he should agree with her. He answered hurriedly—

"Perhaps so, perhaps so, Cicely; but curiosity is a weed of evil growth, my child. Trust to your grandfather—if he judges it right to tell you about this stranger he will doubtless do so."

And a shade came over the vicar's brow, as though notwithstanding his words he too had been somewhat infected by the general feeling of wonder which pervaded the group of children.

"Go on with your play, children; in another half-hour it will be time for you all to be in your homes. Good-night." And so the good man walked away, but not towards his parsonage, whither he had been directing his steps when the group on the village green attracted him. Either some topic had been suggested to his mind which he wished to think out, or he had a more practical reason for retracing his steps instead of continuing his homeward path. The Rev. Mr. Burke had been for many years the vicar of Swinton. He had buried his wife and two only children in the churchyard close by, and now as he descended into the vale of years he was a lonelier man than Peter in his lodge; yet to all outward appearance he was a happier one, for he was of a contented, resigned, philosophical spirit, and made all mankind his friend, individualizing himself with each of his parishioners and thoroughly making their hopes and fears his own. The only one in his whole flock who seemed to set his face resolutely against him was Peter. Either Mr. Burke knew so much of the old gatekeeper's past that the very sight of him awakened bitter recollections, or he dreaded lest the worthy clergyman might strive to unriddle the mysteries

in which Peter loved to envelope himself. Whichever was the true reason, Peter evidently avoided every opportunity by which he and Mr. Burke were likely to be brought even into distant contact; and had he not had Cicely's interest very keenly at heart it is more than probable he would even have forbidden all intercourse between her and the vicar, so keen was his animosity against him.

After Mr. Burke's departure the children, speedily forgetting their passing interest in the advent of a stranger, betook themselves once more to their games, and until the sun had well-nigh crept out of sight behind the trees of the neighbouring wood their merry voices might be heard shouting and laughing in joyous chorus. But the shadows which were gradually surrounding them on all sides warned them that it was time to seek their respective homes if they did not expect a chiding for late hours, and one by one they gradually dispersed, leaving Cicely, who alone lived at any distance, to find her way back to the lodge. It was not often that she was out so late, and perhaps a dim sense of fear stole over her, for, renouncing the shorter path through the wood, she took to the high-road, along which she set off at a brisk pace, wondering to herself the while whether the stranger were yet with her grandfather, and whether she had better enter boldly or remain outside till she was summoned. Her speculations as to what had occurred were, however, speedily arrested by the approach of the very stranger himself, who, with his horse's bridle thrown carelessly over his arm, was walking leisurely in the direction of the village.

"I wonder if he will know me?" thought Cicely to herself. "And shall I drop him a curtesy or walk straight on?" Again, however, her wondering was brought to a sudden stop, for the stranger accosted her at once.

"The grandfather is looking out for you, Miss Cicely. He says he thinks you have had a pretty good bout of

play for this day; but I tell him play-days don't come twice in a lifetime; though I hear you love them better than books—eh, little one?"

Cicely blushed crimson, and for the first time in her life felt ashamed of her proclivities for fun and frolic. Why she should mind the observations of this strange gentleman she could not have defined even to herself, but that they struck home and made her regret that she was still a child and not a staid, responsible woman was the new sensation which these few almost jocular words had aroused within her.

"I don't like dry books, but I like pretty ones—there are so few pretty books at the vicarage."

"Beginning already to excuse herself," he half-muttered; but she heard it not, for he went on: "You shall have some amusing books as soon as I go back to London. I will send them in a parcel to your grandfather."

"Oh, thank you, sir. How very kind and good of you! Will it not be nice to have something pleasant to read during the winter evenings! It was dreary and dull enough here last winter."

And the girl's voice suddenly changed from a tone of glad thankfulness into one of weary depression.

Here was another discovery for the stranger, who was an acute observer of outward signs. Cicely had already learnt what was meant by "being bored;" hence the child was fast merging into the woman.

He did not, however, let her see that he had remarked her change of manner, unless a curious smile which passed over his face told its tale—which to an unsophisticated, country-bred mind was scarcely probable—but he plunged at once into another topic.

"Your grandfather tells me there is a clean respectable inn in the village; but I don't think he knows much about it. It seems to me that he has scarcely been in Swinton village since I was last there myself."

"Oh, grand-dad does not go out. But I never saw you in Swinton before," cried Cicely, with a sudden accession of courage, which either curiosity or the cordiality of the stranger's manner had evoked.

"Before you were born, Cicely, I used to run about in these woods and glades as you do now."

"Before I was born! Are you, then, so very old?"

Cicely computed years from the very limited arithmetical table of her own life. To her young mind a man of five and twenty had already passed from sunshine into shadow, while a woman of that age was in the sere and yellow leaf.

"That is as people may think," said the stranger, smiling. "I at thirty-nine still look forward to many years of brightness, though of course I have more to look back on than you at seventeen can possibly guess."

"I don't know that." And Cicely nodded her head with an amount of girlish sagacity that seemed to amuse her companion. "I don't know that. I have had my troubles too, and I often think them all over when I am by myself."

"You shall tell them to me, sweet Cicely, some time. I shall probably be in these parts for the next few days."

"Tell them to you! And why, pray, should I confide my secrets to you?" And there was a flash in the dark eyes—the adjective before her name had failed to please Cicely, in whose nature there was a chord which jarred at the touch of over-familiarity. She was but a lodge-keeper's grand-daughter, but for all that it seemed as though she possessed the pride of race.

"Nay, nay, little one, there is no especial reason, save that perchance I may claim the privilege of an old friend."

"Why, I tell you I never saw you in my life before."

"But your grandfather and I have not met to-day for the first time."

"That is quite another matter," said Cicely, laughing.

"You must make yourself my friend before I can tell you my secrets."

"So I will. Nothing will give me greater pleasure."

"Oh, you will find it very difficult—you cannot think how hard I am to please." And Cicely laughed merrily at the thought of this fine gentleman wishing to be her friend; while he, studying her inner nature closely the while, made the mental observation that she already knew by instinct how to wield her woman's attributes with grace, and that the bud now unfolding into beauty needed more careful watching and tending than it was likely to receive among the weeds and common flowerets which choked up the hedges around Peter's cottage.

By this time, however, it was nearly dark, and the stranger judged it wiser to postpone till the morrow any farther analysis he might care to make of Cicely's character; so, bidding her speed home at her quickest, he was preparing to start once more in search of a friendly inn, when a third person appeared on the scene. It was the second time that evening that the Rev. Mr. Burke had intruded on a conversation in which he was scarcely intended to take a part. Surely a spirit of restlessness had possessed the worthy vicar.

"How on earth did he come there at that particular moment?" was Cicely's mental query, while she half-dreaded a lecture for talking and laughing with the stranger. The fact was, the vicar had been strolling in the wood, looking perhaps for the very meeting he had stumbled on on the high-road, though, truth to state, he had in no way expected that Cicely would take a part in it.

Her exclamation, "Oh, Mr. Burke! I scarcely knew you in the dark," served, however, as an introduction, for the stranger at once held out his hand.

"My good old friend, I dared scarcely ask if you were still in these parts."

"The man is a wizard and knows everybody," thought

Cicely, half inclined to run away, but still lingering out of curiosity to hear what the vicar, who was peering closely at the stranger, would say. His recollection or his eyesight, however, failed him, for it was not till the other cried, "Harry Durant—I am Harry Durant," that he cordially returned his hand-grip as he exclaimed, "My boy, my dear boy, I am glad to see you back at Swinton. Where have you been all these years?"

"In Italy, studying; and when at last I come home and expect to find my people at Swinton Hall, of course they are all away in Germany or Paris, or somewhere."

"If a warm welcome at Swinton Vicarage will in any degree compensate for its absence at the Hall, you have it with all my heart," said the vicar. "So come along, and let me put you up for the night. Run away home, Cicely, as fast as your young legs can carry you. You have no business to be out so late."

"Shall we not see her part of the way?" suggested the man who had called himself Harry Durant.

"Quite unnecessary, my dear boy. Swinton high-roads are safe enough for young folk. Good-night, Cicely."

"Mr. Durant is going to sleep at the vicarage, and not at the inn, grandfather," was Cicely's announcement when she entered the lodge; but it received no acknowledgment but a grunt and a recommendation that she should mind her own business. Peter did not even inquire how she had come by the knowledge. He was busy arranging some papers, and scarcely even raised his head to look at the girl as she entered.

CHAPTER III.

OVER A PIPE.

SWINTON VICARAGE was a long, low-storied, regular building, with but little of the picturesque to mark it externally, but with a superabundance of that comfort within which to many people materially compensates for beauty. Since the death of Mrs. Burke the drawing-room was opened only on rare occasions, but the parlour or library in which the vicar sat might be quoted as typical of a genial homely dwelling-room, without any affectation of grandeur or display. It was into this private *den* that he conducted Mr. Durant after they had finished their supper, which, like everything provided by the vicar, was plentiful and generous in kind, for there was no stint or want of thought in his mode of conducing to the wants of his fellows. Now he is fitting about, caring for all the minutiae of Mr. Durant's creature comforts, himself filling his pipe with some wonderful Latakia he keeps specially for his friends, and in a thousand little ways testifying his delight at the return of this man who had been so long a stranger, and cordially welcoming him as his guest. They are settling themselves down for a good evening's chat, for the younger man has many an experience to relate, while the life of the vicar, save for the advent of death in his dwelling, has been comparatively monotonous and commonplace.

"Art is not the result of understanding but of inspiration," Mr. Durant is saying as he lounges back comfortably in his armchair, smoking complacently the while.

"And this inspiration you imagine yourself to possess, or you would not have gone to Italy to study?" asks the vicar, smiling as though he did not altogether believe in his friend's genius.

"Yes, I suppose so; but you see there was a very serious obstacle in the way of my advancement."

"And that was?——"

"I have just enough money to make me lazy and cause others less blessed with the world's goods than myself to dub me a virtuoso."

The vicar laughed.

"Riches are not usually considered an impediment," he said; "but then, I suspect, you view most things in life from a different standard to that of other men. Would you go so far as willingly to exchange your gold for the poverty of genius?"

"Ay, would I, if I thought the genius would really exist as well as the poverty. But I have my doubts, my dear Burke—I have my doubts."

"Is one to infer from these remarks," asked the vicar, "that your sojourn in Southern climes has not been wholly successful?"

"On the contrary—very much on the contrary. I have enjoyed life as it only can be enjoyed by a man with artistic proclivities, but who yet has enough of the philosopher about him to quaff pleasures freely and put the cup of annoyance but rarely to his lips. For this I fancy I have an unusual *spécialité*. With such a gift how can life be unsuccessful?"

"Life? No, perhaps not. But these are somewhat heathenish doctrines, my dear boy; I trust during the practice of them you will not quote me as your first master."

Harry Durant laughed joyously.

"I am not so sure that you can altogether disclaim me as a disciple. Looking at the root of the matter, I think I can trace back to my boyhood the extreme veneration I felt for the easy complacency which you always evinced even in the most trying situations. Perhaps I have sought to copy it. Perhaps the disciple, being,

as you would say, more of a heathen, has outstepped the master."

"Bad, bad—this is very bad, Harry." But yet the vicar laughed, as though he felt there was some truth in his former pupil's remarks.

"At all events you have not imparted your philosophical views to all your parishioners. I had a chat with Peter at the lodge to-day, and a more dolorous old curmudgeon I have not seen this many a year," Mr. Durant remarked.

A more serious expression than was its wont spread itself over the vicar's face at this allusion.

"He is the Swinton thorn," he said, gravely.

"And I presume Cicely is its rose?" suggested the younger man. "She is pretty enough and blooming enough to rank with the queen of flowers. Very like her——"

"Hush, Harry, hush! we never mention certain names. It is indiscreet. The girl knows naught of her history—let her innocence remain unimpeached, even for ever, if it be possible."

Mr. Durant took his pipe from his mouth and, laying it on the table, looked at his companion for several seconds without speaking—then he laughed noisily.

"In truth I have left Swinton village very far behind me during the years I have been travelling along the high-roads of the world. So you really imagine that Cicely will go on for aye content with the monotonous nothings this country-side affords, and drone through life the prosy, homely wife of some bucolic? No, no, Burke, don't think it for a moment—my more cosmopolitan experience tells me it is impossible."

"I don't know how you are capable of giving an opinion on the matter. The girl is a perfect stranger to you."

"True I never saw her till to-day; but five minutes' conversation with her has told me more than perhaps years of close intimacy has revealed to you."

"For Heaven's sake, Harry, beware how you talk nonsense to this girl! I feel very responsible for her future welfare; in fact, if I may say so, I almost regard her as my own child. Poor Cicely! Peter is but a broken reed to trust to, and he is her only friend."

"Between us I dare say we can manage something for her—only don't imagine she will be content to remain in this village."

"Between us—between us—I repudiate the partnership," said the vicar, testily. "Why should you show any interest in her? I don't understand this sudden *empressement* on your part."

"Possibly not." And Mr. Durant crossed his legs and smoked vigorously, as though he in nowise cared to make the vicar a confidant of the reasons which prompted him to interest himself in Cicely; and though he was pushed hard with several leading questions, he exhibited an amount of taciturnity on the subject which was worthy even of Peter himself.

The vicar, notwithstanding his proverbial complacency in matters of trial, was obviously vexed. He had known Harry Durant as a boy, when, being an orphan, he had passed much of his time at Swinton Hall, which belonged to his maternal uncle. In fact, frequently during the holidays Master Harry had become his pupil. For years, however, the vicar had seen nothing of him; yet with the recollection strong in his mind that as a youngster he was not easily restrained, but wild and full of adventure, he scarcely judged that after years spent in a careless, Bohemian life he was exactly the man to choose as a partner in the guidance of a young girl's career. After a time they drifted into other talk, and the night moved apace, yet their conversation had lost its tone of intimacy and good-fellowship. Both the men evidently had a knowledge of past episodes in the life of Peter the lodge-keeper, and, indirectly, as they were concerned with his grand-

daughter, but neither of them cared to speak of what he knew. There was decidedly a want of trust existing between them—each feared lest the other might not be so well-informed as himself, and that some fresh information might consequently be conveyed by an unguarded word.

With the vicar, though the sacrament of confession was unknown in his religious code, yet an instinctive sense of honour forbade him to reveal secrets of which he would never have been the possessor save in his capacity of spiritual adviser—hence his silence; but in the case of Mr. Durant some closer individual connection with past occurrences probably prompted him to make no farther remarks—at least the vicar thought so.

And while the younger man was with some garrulity relating many adventures in which he had taken active part during his residence abroad, the vicar's busy brain was scarcely following the narrative; it was vainly searching through old recollections for the missing link which could connect Harry Durant with the mystery which enveloped the inmates of the Swinton lodge. The vicar's tale was evidently somewhat incomplete; else he could scarcely have failed to fit in the various scenes and dates. No, it is no use, and once more he seeks to dash *con amore* into Mr. Durant's vividly-described pictures of Southern climes.

"So you have left all these bright sunshiny scenes, in the description of which you commingle the talents of the poet and the painter, and have returned to England for good—is it so?" asked the vicar, after listening, or apparently listening, to a longer rhapsody than usual on the part of his ex-pupil.

"For good? Well, yes, I suppose so; but I have scarcely yet had time to shake my ideas together and form an opinion on the merits and demerits of England as a permanent residence. Perhaps I shall marry and settle

down respectably—there is no knowing. I have always professed a preference for the celibate state, but ‘when I said I would die a bachelor I did not think I should live till I were married.’”

“One of your cousins at the Hall, perchance,” suggested the vicar, “might prove the chosen lady. Did you meet them abroad?”

“I did, and by that same meeting can aver that no such marriage is likely to take place. I have scarcely escaped to my present age the blandishments of pink-cheeked, blue-eyed missish girls, however much they may be backed by the manœuvres of a tolerably open-eyed mamma, to be let in by my lady aunt and her two cooing doves.”

“Harry, Harry, you are as incorrigible as of old. Yet you came over to pay Swinton Hall and its inmates a visit—expressed some regret, too, at their absence.”

“Are they not my nearest relations, and is not Swinton Hall my *quasi*-home?” And there was a tone of sarcasm in his voice, while his lips could be seen to quiver beneath his thickly curling beard.

“Love has not, then, been strengthened by absence,” observed Mr. Burke, musingly.

“Love strengthened?” And the young man laughed. “Say rather hate has not weakened; that is surely a more correct term to apply to my feelings for my dear aunt; that is, if she be capable of evoking any sentiment at all save one of contempt. But don’t let us talk of her. I see a lowering expression on your brow which betokens no good; and as for me, a contemplative survey of the subject invariably produces dyspepsia.”

Hence it may be inferred that the relations between Mr. Harry Durant and the domestic circle at Swinton Hall were not of the most amicable kind. For a time, owing to their temporary absence, disputes were likely to remain in abeyance; and Harry Durant, faithful to his established

ceded of never allowing himself to think of disagreeable subjects, was resolved to make no farther allusion to the family strife which had in the past so influenced his life as to drive him forth an alien to seek fortune in a foreign land. A second subject, then, had arisen on which he and the vicar could scarcely meet on common ground, and the evening, begun so thoroughly with the earnest of mutual regard and confidential understanding, threatened to fall off somewhat drearily. Between intervals of forced talk there were long hiatuses, during which neither man seemed to have sufficient energy to seize a general topic and force politics, literature, or science to hold the place mutual confidences had abandoned. They were old friends, and stood but little on ceremony in their intercourse with each other; and at last they trusted almost to the sociability of silence to strengthen the bond of union which had bound them in the distant past. Harry Durant smoked on without speaking, while the vicar sat moodily and gazed vacantly at the fire which he had ordered to be lighted, more for cheerfulness than for warmth. It is getting near midnight—surely all Swinton parish save the vicar and his guest are long since abed and asleep—for they keep early hours, these country folk; and to see lights burning so late even at the vicarage is a very unusual occurrence.

After a long interval of quiet, when the clock on the mantelshelf, as it ticks monotonously, is the only sign of life, the vicar starts to his feet.

“What is that—what can it be—what can have happened?”

“Nothing, my dear man; I heard nothing. Your brain is getting sensitive from watching longer than usual to-night. Let us to bed.”

But the vicar was not to be appeased by his friend's raillery.

“Nonsense, Harry; I am not easily deceived. I distinctly heard a footfall on the gravel walk outside. Ah!

there is the dog. I thought he would begin to bark ere long."

"*En avant!*" cried Harry Durant, shouldering the poker. "Let us see who this insolent intruder may be who dares to interrupt the peace of Swinton Vicarage in the dead of night."

"Pray be rational, Harry. It is probably a summons to some sick or dying parishioner, though we had a perfectly clean bill of health this morning." And the vicar unfastened the low window, and, throwing it open, peered out into the darkness. The dog was still barking in a low tone, as though more restless than irritated, and to the vicar's shout of "Hallo, Nero! what is the matter?" no answer was vouchsafed, save a sharp testimony from the animal in question that he had heard the voice of his master.

"It is nothing at all. I told you so," said Mr. Durant, who still stood on the hearthrug, shouldering his poker and smoking his pipe. "You are nervous, old fellow. Drop the subject, and let us go to bed."

The vicar, thus admonished, proceeded to shut the window reluctantly. Evidently he was only half-convinced. It is not easy to shake a man's belief in the instinctive sagacity of his dog; but the frame, slowly descending, had scarcely reached the sash when a violent rattling at the front door brought with it the conviction that the vicar's surmises had been by no means unfounded.

Without another word both the men went into the outer passage together, Harry Durant having deposited his poker when he found there was some reality in the situation. With difficulty the vicar succeeded in undoing the various bolts and fastenings. It was evident that a certain amount of nervousness had possessed him; at last, however, the door was open. Standing in the porch, with a shawl thrown over her head and her bright cheeks

pale, almost livid, as though from some sudden fright, was—Cicely.

“Grandfather! oh, come to grandfather! Quick—quick!” was all that she had the power to say, and she fell senseless at the feet of the two men.

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH THE DARK VALLEY.

A FEW minutes sufficed to lift Cicely up, carry her into the vicar’s sitting-room, and summon his old housekeeper, who, already comfortably enjoying her first sleep, came grumbling downstairs at being awakened to wait on that “bit of a girl.” In fact, so ill-tempered and cross-grained did she appear, that Mr. Durant resolved to remain himself till the girl should be restored to consciousness, and let the vicar set off alone to discover, if possible, what had befallen at the lodge.

“Speedily I will follow you,” he had said as Mr. Burke, rather loth as he was to leave him, had departed; but a few minutes grew into many, and Cicely still lay motionless where they had placed her. Even the old servant became less irritated at being summoned from her bed as she stood and watched the usually bright young beauty, who looked pale and ghastly enough now to be the bride of grim Death himself; while to their many varied tentatives on her behalf the state of coma in which she lay for a time refused to yield.

“Let her just sleep it out; she is exhausted, maybe,” said the crone. “Or perhaps she has seen a ghost in the wood—there is one wanders there of nights, so folks say. For my part, I wouldn’t be out after dark to save the best

life as is. But they lasses, they is always running after lovers or summut."

"Nurse Frizby, you are a fool," was Harry Durant's by no means complimentary rejoinder as he raised Cicely's head and tried to pour some brandy into her mouth.

"And who may you be, sir, as goes for calling an old body names?" she demanded, angrily. "My stars, if it beant Master Harry!"

"Oh, then, you do know me?"

"Know the blessed face of you? I should think I do. Why, you was that worritin' and teasin' a young scape-grace, one wasn't likely to forget you."

"Well, I'm pretty good at 'worritin' and teasin'' now when I want a thing done, and I shall not rest till this child opens her eyes. So either try some other plan to wake her, or let us have the village doctor fetched."

"He beant no good—don't get no practice in these 'ere parts. She'll come round presently, never fear. And to think as you are Master Harry, and me not know as you was here! Of course, now, you thought I was at the Hall; but I came here to look after the vicar when the master and the missis went abroad. None of they furrin' parts for me."

The idea of the family from the Hall having any desire to travel in "furrin' parts" with Mrs. Frizby, who had been for many years the crosspatch nurse of the establishment, as an attendant, would have evoked a laugh from Mr. Durant if he had not been too much taken up by Cicely to do more than bestow a very passing thought on any other matter. He, however, remembered her proclivities of old—how as a boy she used to beat him unmercifully with a strap which was her constant companion, and in many ways contribute to the juvenile miseries both of himself and his cousins; and he determined on no account to leave Cicely to her tender mercies, whatever dire event might have occurred to produce the girl's state of torpor.

"There, I told you she would come round in time—she is opening her eyes wide enough now. A girl like her beant likely to droop long, as though she was a fine lady. Look up, chit; here's Master Harry a worritin' over you as though you was one of the ladies at the Hall."

Cicely, thus appealed to, cast an imploring look at Harry Durant, and then shut her eyes again and shivered.

"What is it, Cicely, my dear child?" he asked, in gentle accents, so different to the harsh, almost jeering tones in which nurse Frizby had addressed her. "Tell me, little one, will you not, what has happened?" And he took Cicely's cold hand and held it almost tenderly between both his own. Once more she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Take me away; don't let me see it or think of it any more—oh, somebody help me to forget it!"

"Bless the girl's heart! has she gone mad?" muttered the old woman; but an authoritative "Silence, nurse Frizby!" put a temporary end to her prating, and she walked off to another part of the room with much the appearance of a whipped hound. To be reprimanded, instead of to reprimand, was indeed a new phase in the history of nurse Frizby's daily life.

Left thus virtually alone with the girl, Harry Durant leant over her and whispered soothing words such as he knew well how to utter. Perhaps he had caught the low love-tones of Southern climes, or perchance it was the instinctive nature of the man which had taught him to be kind and endearing and gentle with women.

A dangerous attribute, from whencesoever he had attained it, was this soft, kindly manner—more insidious in its results to the recipient of his courtesies than to the donor.

On Cicely, as on others who had experienced it before her, the calming process told, and a sense of immunity from harm and less dread of that real or imaginary danger

of which she had not yet uttered seemed to steal over her.

"Who will care for me now grandfather is dying or dead?" she said at last, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

Harry Durant sprang from the kneeling posture he had assumed beside the couch on which they had laid her.

Here was a home question—one which seemed to take him as it were by storm; for, though he had been discussing Cicely's future lot in a temperate sort of manner with the vicar, it had not entered into his calculations to imagine that the time was so near when it really would become a subject for serious thought.

Yet in what way could Cicely's weal or woe interest Harry Durant? Was he so large-hearted as to be the declared champion of all forlorn, helpless damsels?

"Your grandfather dying!" he exclaimed. "Why, he was well enough only a few hours ago."

"Oh! it is dreadful to think of." And Cicely began to tremble violently, and covered up her face with her hands. "He went out—'away to the village,' he said—after I got home, and I sat there and waited and waited ever so long all alone. I did not dare to go to bed, for grandfather is never late of nights. At last I heard a scratching noise at the door. I opened it after a while, when I had summoned courage, and there stood dumb Molly. Whatever she wanted at that time of night I could not understand; but she pulled me by the frock and made signs for me to come, and I felt sure some evil had befallen my poor daddy. Off she set at a brisk pace, I keeping up with her as well as I could, for my legs from sheer fright refused to go quickly, and under a tree in the little wood there he lay. Oh, help me to forget it—help me to forget it!" And Cicely worked herself backwards and forwards in a perfect paroxysm of fear and horror.

"Be calm, little one ; the bad dream will pass ere long," whispered Mr. Durant's softest tones.

"Dream !" she cried. "It was no dream, but poor old daddy lying on the ground, weltering in his blood."

"My child, is this so ? How foolish of Molly to go for you !"

Nurse Frizby, who at the other end of the room had been listening attentively to Cicely's tale, now came forward.

"Looks monstrous like suicide, don't it, Master Harry ?" she exclaimed ; but he silenced her with an imperative wave of the hand.

"Take care of this child here, and be kind and good to her, while I go and see what really has happened to Peter. It may not be as bad as we think. Shall I go, Cicely ?"

"Yes, please, sir ; only come back quickly, or I shall think you have been killed too."

It was evident Cicely's nerves were thoroughly unstrung by the tragedy she had witnessed in so unexpected a manner, or she would not thus have feared for Mr. Durant.

Once bidden to depart, Harry Durant set off rapidly in the direction of the little wood ; but, finding no one there, he went on to the lodge, whither the vicar and dumb Molly had already transported Peter. The old man was still alive, though the feeble spark was well-nigh extinct. He sought vainly to speak ; but his secret, if he had any to reveal, would never be divulged by him in this world. Peter was already passing laboriously through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

A man and horse from the Hall had at once been despatched for the nearest doctor ; but Peter's case was beyond medical aid ; the neighbouring practitioner would scarcely be able to give more than a certificate as to the causes of death, which according to human judgment could scarcely be ascribed to his own hand. The wound which, occasioning the loss of blood, had so frightened Cicely, was but a slight one, and had probably been produced by a

heavy fall against the trunk of the tree where dumb Molly had found him. "The presence of old age and a certain amount of disease would account for sudden faintness, followed by collapse and death," the doctors said at the inquest which was the natural *sequitur* of this sudden demise. Though how dumb Molly came to be in the wood was a question which would rise in Harry Durant's mind in spite of himself, notwithstanding the explanation that the deaf and dumb, almost half-witted creature was in the habit of wandering about at odd hours. In fact, it was more than probable that she it was who had gained for the little wood the reputation for being haunted which it had obtained among the country-people round about.

So Old Peter died as mysteriously as he had lived, and with no one to close his eyes save the vicar he had either feared or hated during life—for it were difficult to say which feeling had actuated him, though probably the vicar, had he chosen, might have revealed the cause of Peter's antipathy. One word only had he spoken ere his spirit passed away, and that was "Cicely." As Harry Durant leant over his bed trying to help, if possible, in ministering to his wants, the old man whispered her name into his ear as though committing her to his care, and then turned away as if to die at peace, as far at least as Cicely was concerned.

It was all over—the last rites had been performed, the lodge was shut up, awaiting orders from the family abroad, and Cicely still dwelt at the vicarage, sharing nurse Frizby's room and receiving from the old woman more consideration than it was her habit to bestow upon "bits of girls."

She commiserated the poor child's lone position, and moreover she elected to refer in an abstract, incoherent way to past tender passages between herself and Peter in days now long gone by, verifying the assertion that on

every life the sunshine of romance has fallen more or less slantingly.

A long earnest conversation had taken place between the vicar and Mr. Durant on the morning following the funeral, and then the latter had left for London somewhat in wrath, and with no cordiality in the shake of the hand he had felt himself bound to bestow on his host at parting; yet for all his anger he had not failed to notice a pair of dark eyes which, dimmed by tears, looked sorrowfully at him from an upper window, and the remembrance of which remained with him as he journeyed rapidly towards the metropolis, and perhaps pleaded Cicely's cause more effectually than did even Peter's last half-uttered recommendation.

That Harry Durant had a scheme on Cicely's behalf there was little doubt, and that the vicar highly disapproved of his scheme was equally a matter of certainty; but Mr. Durant, with what he considered his wider range of worldly knowledge, was not the man to be thwarted in his projects by a country parson, and from the determination apparent in his look and manner it was obvious that he intended to walk straight along the path he had selected, without allowing himself to be thrust into any side ways by what he was pleased to call "old Burke's snivelling dread of a row."

Whatever Mr. Durant's plan of action might be did not transpire, but after a hurried dinner at his club he took the night train to Paris.

CHAPTER V

THE GREY WIDOW.

A BRIGHT sunshiny autumn day—the Bois de Boulogne instinct with life, all aglow with gay toilettes and the faces of fair women, who pass and repass in their dainty equipages, smilingly recognizing their numerous acquaintances, nor relaxing the honey of their look for a moment, even while the waspish remark is muttered *sotto voce* at the expense of *her* on whom they smile the most benignly. “Thus runs the world away.”

As one particular victoria dashes swiftly along the broad avenue leading from the Jardin d’Acclimatation, borne on its rapid course by a tiny pair of priceless ponies, every hat is raised.

Its occupant is evidently a fashion for the time. She is alone, and as she lies listlessly back in her carriage she returns the numerous salutations with a languid inclination of the head, as though the homage laid at her shrine bored her from the very fact of its nauseating excess. To judge from her toilette her tastes are simple and refined, for though rich in texture and effective in design, her dress is of the palest grey, without any interfering colours to jar with its delicate softness.

“Is she English or American?” strangers ask. The apathetic indifference of her mien at once precludes all possibility of her French origin. The question is seldom answered definitely, for, truth to tell, no one exactly knows whence she has come.

“Why, it is Mrs. Fitzalan—do you not know her?” is the usual somewhat ambiguous reply.

“Which Fitzalans does she belong to—there is an old

family of that name in S——shire?" brings no nearer answer.

"Heaven knows. She is a swell, of course. No one could be so well-bred, receive so graciously, in fact, be so thoroughly *chic*, unless she were a swell."

And not an individual ever got any farther than this in their strictures on the Grey Widow, as she was not unfrequently called. She had been absent from Paris for some time, and had but just returned for the winter, hence her presence in the Bois on that especial afternoon evoked perhaps a larger share of notice than on any previous occasion. But she seemed by no means elated, she was as ever calm, reposeful, and with just enough of sarcasm in the expression of her countenance to denote an under-current of character which was not usually allowed to have its full vent. It was not riches which brought so many flutterers round Mrs. Fitzalan, for she always gave herself out to be a poor woman; and though, as the French say, *elle savait vivre*, yet she was perpetually informing her intimates of the straits she was compelled to pass through in order to surround herself with the good things of life. A widow! Was she a widow? Who ever doubted the fact? Yet no one could assert with accuracy when, where, and how Mr. Fitzalan had died, much less claim the high privilege of having been acquainted with him in his lifetime—he was an American, of course!

The ponies reached an hotel on the Champs Elysées, and Mrs. Fitzalan mounted into her apartments, which, notwithstanding her poverty, were situated *au premier*. They were simply and prettily furnished, luxury never daring to outstep the limits of good taste, and were in strict accordance with the subdued, dreamy expression of countenance and the neutral tints in which their owner loved to drape herself.

She gave her bonnet to a maid who appeared on the scene, and threw herself into a *fauteuil* by the window. A

large mirror reflected her full-length figure as she lounged there, and she smiled superciliously as she viewed her own image. Yet it was no unpleasing picture; for though no longer in the first flush of youth, Mrs. Fitzalan had but reached that meridian of life when ripper charms are revealed and fascination has been allowed to change places with the coy shyness of the *ingénue*. There was a flash in her dark eyes as she looked at herself, which, accompanying as it did the contemptuous curl of her lip, denoted that both her languor and indifference were but assumed attributes attendant on that rôle in life which for some reason she had assigned to herself. For a long half-hour she lay thus, as though weighing carefully the power of her beauty, or perchance counting back through a range of years the ravages which time had wrought upon her.

"It is getting late—will madame dress?" They were the shrill tones of the *soubrette*, and Mrs. Fitzalan started from her dream.

"No, get me a *peignoir*. I am not going out to-night; and admit no visitors, no matter who may call."

"Is madame ill?"

"No child, no. *Ennuyée*, that is all. Do as you are bid."

"Madame is *ennuyée*, and she is going to stay at home and receive no visitors—but that is the way to increase the malady." And the *soubrette*, muttering to herself, went off to obey her mistress's orders. And Mrs. Fitzalan, wrapped in the soft folds of her *peignoir*, toyed with her solitary repast, and looked the picture of inertness and of that sort of forlorn desolation which has not the strength or will to rouse itself. By the time she had sent away the servants, and reclining on the sofa, with a book for her sole companion, was sipping her cup of mocha, a loud ring at the bell suggested the possibility of the evening post. A bright flush for a moment spread itself over Mrs. Fitzalan's

usually pale features, and, tossing her book away with a jerk, she raised herself into an attitude of listening expectancy.

There were several letters—notes on variously tinted papers—but they were passed carelessly on one side; at the very bottom of the pile lay the expected missive. To judge from external appearances the writer of this epistle scarcely belonged to the circle in which Mrs. Fitzalan moved, and yet she opened it with eager anxiety, while those of her more aristocratic acquaintances were thrown neglected on one side. It was a long letter, full of erasures, blots, and blurs. But Mrs. Fitzalan read it and re-read it with the greatest care, and the colour became fixed in her cheeks as she devoured its contents, and the tremulous working of her little hands as she held it plainly showed how deep was the emotion those spidery, ill-formed signs evoked. She crunched it up into a little ball, and, holding it tightly in her hand, sank once more among her cushions and closed her eyes.

“Then I was not mistaken, and to-night we might have met,—to-morrow, the next day at farthest, a rencontre is inevitable. Am I equal to the situation?” And as she sprang lightly from the sofa and cast off momentarily her languid, dejected mien, the action itself answered the half-spoken query.

“It is well that I have received this letter. Ah, there is a strange fate which pre-admonishes me of coming events.”

She smoothed out the almost illegible scrawl, and having once more perused its contents, held it to the lamp and watched silently to see it burn; then calmly, passively, as though no excitement had of late prevailed, she read the hitherto neglected notes which had accompanied it, and made somewhat caustic *sotto voce* comments on their contents as she threw them one after the other on the table—invitations to dine, to drive, to skate at the new

rink. It was with a little hard laugh that she looked at them as they lay *en masse* before her.

"And it is of such trash as that that the greatest issues of life are composed. Refuse to join in all these idle nothings, and you would die forgotten and alone. Rob society of its outer coating of veneer, and, my God! how coarse and ill-constructed is the inner workmanship!"

Once more she dropped down, as though oppressed by thought, and, her head bowed on her hands, she remained motionless. Whatever had occurred to stir up thus potently the depths within, with an effort Mrs. Fitzalan strove to repress her emotions. At length, starting up, she passed her hand several times wearily across her brow, as though to mesmerize her brain into the tranquillity necessary for practical working. Like a ray of light a smile broke upon her features, as suddenly an idea seemed to develop itself from among the mists with which ever since her return home she seemed to have been enshrouded.

"*À la bonne heure*—yes, I will take the initiative." And seating herself at a little *escritoire* which stood at one corner of the room, she commenced writing rapidly.

One peep over her shoulder discovers that it is no answer to that mysterious communication she has just received on which she is engaged, but she is copying a long list of names, some of the noblest and fairest in Paris, from a book which lies before her.

"Yes, these will do—brilliant and select. The importance of the situation demands the pruning-knife."

A few minutes are devoted to the consideration of which evening will be the most convenient and successful, and in less than half an hour some dozens of cards of invitation lie scattered about Mrs. Fitzalan's pretty room.

"So madame is going to *désennuyer* herself by giving a party?" is Victorine's comment when she desires her to send Jacques the very first thing in the morning to distribute the cards.

"Yes, and bring the last two new dresses which have come home. Let me see if either of them is fit to wear."

"Fit to wear? Why, madame has never had them on, and they are both perfect. *Mon Dieu!* madame is *capricieuse* to-night."

"Bring the dresses, Victorine, and don't chatter."

Both colourless, white and grey. "*Toujours la même chose, c'est fatigant,*" as the *soubrette* said, who loved a bit of colour.

Mrs. Fitzalan selected the white dress, which, as the maid had announced, was faultless.

"Natural flowers, you understand, Victorine, and pearls—nothing else."

So passions, emotions, memories, whatever they were, that had been called up by the sight of a face as Mrs. Fitzalan drove in the Bois, and strengthened superlatively by the letter she had received later on, had they all faded into nothingness, or had they merged into woman's reputed safety-valve—an assembly and a toilette?

Yet as Mrs. Fitzalan sat down once more, the practical portion of her work being over, there was little doubt that she viewed but as means to an end these pleasant trifles, which to others of her sex are the *ne plus ultra* of life. The platitudes of general society bored her, yet she had elected herself its queen; the details of a toilette she regarded as beneath contempt, yet she entered into every minutia, knowing full well that without careful attention she would lose her *renommée* as the best-dressed woman in Paris.

She was aware, none better, that the announcement which would be spread far and wide on the morrow that Mrs. Fitzalan would be at home on the following Thursday would cause in many a breast bitter heart-sickness among those who were uninvited, and perhaps the knowledge gave her pleasure; for, climbed though she had to the exalted

position she now held in social life, had there not been moments perchance in Mrs. Fitzalan's past career when she too had craved an *entrée*, even perhaps been guilty of an obsequious act, in order to pass some closed portal? Now, tyrant, like the rest of her sex, she tightly holds the cord which divides her from those she deems without the pale, and bows stiffly, with her cold smile, to poor stragglers who by her means have sought to enter into the charmed precincts of which she is the self-constituted guardian. Nor had Mrs. Fitzalan judged wrongly. Ere twenty-four hours are over all Paris is astir—that is, all the little social English and American world which makes the great French capital its home.

It is the first *réunion* of the season, and Mrs. Fitzalan knows so well how to bring the right people together that it cannot fail to be a success.

“Of course it cannot be so charming as those little dinners to produce which she understands so thoroughly the art, *mais que voulez vous*—one must occasionally jostle against one's fellow-men in a pleasant, well-dressed, well-bred crowd.”

Thus talk the invited guests, while to those whose names are not on the fair widow's invitation-list there is still left the hope that they may one day, if not now, be included in the *recherché* throng.

And while chatter and heart-burnings are raging pretty equally in the exterior world, Mrs. Fitzalan is placidly pursuing her even course; no sign is apparent on the surface of her actions to denote that that especial party is likely to have any distinctive feature to mark it beyond any other *soirée* at which she has received her friends. Still in her hours of privacy and solitude does she not devote more time to details, is she not more scrupulous about amalgamations, than she has ever been on previous occasions?

Perchance this very preoccupation produces the extra

amount of languor which makes those around think she is more than usually indifferent as to coming events.

How people are judged by external evidence on small premises only, while their real inner life is hidden away far from the reach of either sight or ken !

CHAPTER VI.

THE BERTRANDS.

Two days more, and the eventful Thursday on which Mrs. Fitzalan is to open her doors to the *élite* of Paris will arrive. She is sitting in her drawing-room, talking, not gaily—Mrs. Fitzalan never allows the dulcet tones of her silvery voice to be strained into a laugh—but equably and softly. Her companion is a man just past what is called the prime of life, bearing on his brow the impress of thought, perhaps of care. He is lounging at his ease in a large armchair, and in the enjoyment of Mrs. Fitzalan's conversation is striving to forget certain bygone reminiscences which seem to haunt him even in the gayest capital of Europe. He is scarcely confiding the history of his annoyances, whatever they may be, to the widow; while she—when was she ever known to confide the secrets of her past life? Yet their talk is intimate and flows evenly.

A letter is presented to Mrs. Fitzalan, to which a messenger is awaiting an answer.

The hot blood courses over her face as she reads it; but in a moment recovering herself, "I am engaged at present; I will send," is the cold reply.

"Pray do not treat me as a stranger, or I will go at once." And Sir Hubert Fleming starts to his feet.

"Pardon, my friend ; I cannot spare you now." And she places just the tips of her fingers on his arm. "You are the very person I should have sent for before answering this letter ; and, by an unusual freak of fortune, you are by my side."

"You would have sent for me before answering a letter ? Mrs. Fitzalan, this is a compliment for which I was scarcely prepared."

"And therefore I trust you will appreciate it the more. But a truce to nonsense. Who are the Bertrands—yes, the name is Bertrand—English people, just arrived in Paris ? Tell me, Sir Hubert, who are they in their own country ?"

"Bertrand—Bertrand ? I do not know them personally." And Sir Hubert puckers his brow into a thoughtful expression. "Of course," he exclaims, after a moment's pause. "I thought I had a hazy recollection of the name. There is but one family of Bertrand ; they have an old place in R——shire. I hear they are delightful. A father and mother, and two young daughters—I believe no son ; so the girls are co-heiresses."

"Ah ! my letter makes no mention of their fortunes. It is from Lady Montagu. She asks permission to bring the mother and daughters here on Thursday evening, in order to introduce them to me."

"And you will consent, of course ?"

"Well, I hardly know. I scarcely like to make fresh acquaintances unless I know all about them. It is such a bore to have to drop them !"

"There is no fear that you will regret this introduction. The Bertrands are quite *comme il faut*, and go into the very best society in London. Latterly, as you are aware, I have been somewhat misanthropical, and the young ladies have not been dated long, but I know all about them ; in fact, I used to be rather *lié* with the only male representative of the family. A deuced good fellow he is. I wonder what

has become of him? I should like to present him to you."

"Ah!" Mrs. Fitzalan shrugged her shoulders, as though she thought the male representative of the Bertrands would infallibly prove a bore, and she went on: "If I do invite these people for Thursday you will promise to come and meet them, will you not?"

"I will promise to be Mrs. Fitzalan's guest; the presence or absence of the Bertrands will not affect me much."

"No, no, of course not, Sir Hubert; but I should like you to be here." And Mrs. Fitzalan's tones were just a little quivering and tremulous. She went on, however, without allowing him time for a remark: "So you really think I had better ask them? On your responsibility be it, remember."

"I have no fear as far as their social position is concerned. Certainly it would be quite impossible for me to form any conjecture whether a friendship, as you ladies count friendship, is likely to arise from this introduction." And Sir Hubert's usually grave features relaxed into a smile.

"Naturally you do not believe in eternal oaths among women—what man ever did? Well, I believe we are as true to each other as we are——" And she stopped, for such a look of pain came over him as to remind Mrs. Fitzalan that she had wandered into a forbidden land. He finished the sentence for her, however.

"As women are to men. You are right. Faith and truth! Woe be to the man who believes in either. And yet how hopeless were one's life without belief!"

There was a silence; for though Mrs. Fitzalan burned with the desire to vindicate her sex, yet she wisely determined to forego the inclination. To her knowledge there were episodes in Sir Hubert Fleming's past life which would scarcely bear even her delicate handling; and after

a time, during which he brooded silently, she rose and wrote the note which was to open her doors for the entrance of Mrs. and the Misses Bertrand.

The bell was rung and the messenger despatched, and Mrs. Fitzalan sat down once more in her sofa-corner. She affected to be her passive tranquil self, but unquestionably there was something in connection with this new introduction which almost overpowered her. For now that she had "done the deed" and sent the fiat forth to bid these people come, the restlessness of fever seemed to possess her; even while she sat there her hands travelled rapidly about her lap and dress, as though they would help to work off some of the mental pressure, and a hectic spot burnt on each cheek while she talked pretty, graceful platitudes to Sir Hubert.

"You will not fail me on Thursday evening?" she repeated nervously, when at last he rose to take his departure.

"When did I ever fail you? It is too high a privilege to be deemed your friend." And he courteously bent over the tiny fevered hand which lay for a moment in his.

He walked moodily down the stairs, his hat well set on his brow, and passed on to the Champs Elysées, striving with all his might to play the part of incarnate misery. And yet an hour spent in Mrs. Fitzalan's society could not be said to fail in its effect, for, sorely against himself, he both looked and felt the better for it; and so obviously his friends thought, for he has not proceeded many paces ere a hand is laid on his shoulder.

"Hullo, Fleming! why, you look quite cheery—for you. What good luck has befallen?"

"Nothing especial; but do you grudge me a moment of sunshine, even supposing it to exist?—which, God knows, it does not for me."

"Not I; I hate clouds and darkness, as you know. Have you been to see the widow?"

"I have—and what of it?"

"It is dangerous, my good fellow, dangerous; though she knows how to make the sun shine brightly, does she not?"

"For you, perhaps—my sun has set."

"What infernal twaddle you do talk, Fleming! Come on and dine at the Café Anglais, and don't be such a duffer."

And the young man—for he was a very young man who had accosted Sir Hubert—linked his arm in his with a degree of familiarity which the difference in their ages scarcely seemed to warrant. The fact was that Sir Hubert, notwithstanding his misanthropy, was a universal favourite; his courtesy and thorough breeding won all hearts, and all his acquaintances did their utmost to lure him, if possible, out of the cloud-land in which, if left to himself, he elected to dwell.

"Come on to the Café Anglais; I feel intoxicatedly happy to-day, and I want some one to share my delirium of joy."

"You could scarcely have chosen a worse companion, my dear Algy. But what has occasioned all this bliss?"

"Sweet May is in Paris—hurrah!"

"And who is 'sweet May'?"

"Now really, Fleming, this is past all permission. Why, everybody knows May Bertrand, and, notwithstanding your doldrums, I thought you were tolerably *lancé* in the world."

"So, so, you are bitten in that quarter, are you? And is your siren very charming?"

"She is just the prettiest, sweetest, loveliest girl in Christendom."

Sir Hubert patted the young man kindly on the arm, while a sad smile stole over his face.

"Of course, of course—so they all are while the glamour lasts."

"Now, Fleming, none of your nasty chilling remarks—at any rate, not about the Queen of the May, if you please—you can't have anything to say against her."

"My boy, I never saw her in my life, but I am to be introduced to her on Thursday night."

"At Mrs. Fitzalan's? Are the Bertrands to be there? It is wonderful what way your widow has made in Paris, Fleming."

Algy Duncombe, though he had only been of age a few months, had a far acuter knowledge of men and manners than his older companion. He was a thorough specimen of Young England—lived fast, dressed fast, talked fast; in fact, was what the ladies among his own immediate relations, called "a very naughty boy;" yet for all that he was sowing his wild oats like a gentleman, and, the men said, would probably make a "fine fellow" at last. With other peculiarities typical of the set to which he belonged, Algy had not much belief in things either secular or divine, and amongst the many humanities whom he doubted was Mrs. Fitzalan. Yet, like all mortals, he had, notwithstanding his *soi-disant* scepticism, a religion and a god, or rather goddess, for the fair May was his passion *pro tem*. His friends said the fever would not last, but in the mean time in her was centred the one belief of his life. He was not altogether charmed at the idea of her introduction to the fashionable widow.

"That is, if she is a widow. For my part, I don't give her credit for much," had been the end of his sentence as he dropped Sir Hubert's arm.

"Well, that is no one's affair but her own. She is very good and kind and benevolent, and quite *grande dame*. What more do you want?"

"Nothing more while the glamour lasts, eh, Fleming? We all think our house-sparrows birds of paradise till we find they are nothing of the kind. You have been done once, old fellow; don't let yourself be done again."

Sir Hubert Fleming winced as though these words had gone straight home, but he did not attempt to answer them, and they proceeded in silence for some little distance.

These two men were the exact antipodes to each other, and yet they were not infrequently companions. Sir Hubert believing, trusting in, making excuses for every one, notwithstanding that he had once been cruelly deceived; Algy Duncombe scoffing, mocking, looking for evil, although he had known no sorrow, and still had the sunshine of life in its fullest radiance about his path. The young man revelling in an almost impertinent confidence in himself—his opinions, his good looks, his position—and yet asserting himself with an amount of *bonhomie* which made his conceit rather amusing than disagreeable; the older man retiring and silent, hiding his light, as it were, under a bushel, allowing this boy to rule over him and dictate to him as though he were his mental superior. For knowledge of the ways of the world Algy Duncombe had perhaps few equals; but in intellectual power, refinement of thought, and intimate acquaintance with the deeper instruction gained from books, Sir Hubert Fleming might, if he had been less bashful, have taken his position on a pinnacle to which Algy Duncombe would never attain.

Algy fancied he was of use to Sir Hubert in occasionally giving him what he was pleased to call “an eye-opener;” while Sir Hubert, who really enjoyed basking in the bright geniality of the boy’s society, tried to make himself believe that he had selected him as a companion for the sake of influencing him for good. Whatever the origin of the alliance, it was at least one likely to be productive of benefit to both the *alliés*.

“Miss Bertrand will have money,” observed Sir Hubert on a sudden, after they had walked some distance in silence.

“Yes, I know; and I have not a sou, I suppose you mean to insinuate, or shall not have in six months, at the rate I am living now.”

"Things are not quite so bad as that, I trust, my dear Algy. Your father makes you a handsome allowance."

"Does he? According to his old-fashioned ideas I suppose he thinks it sufficient; but if I did not fly a few kites I should never manage to get on at all. But the worst of it is the cursed things will fall due, and the governor's £300 a year is no mortal use. He says he cannot afford to give me any more. I am sure I hope it is not true, or I don't know what will happen to me eventually."

"Your father always seems to me a substantial man, careful of his money more from habit than necessity."

"Humph! I don't believe in much, you will say, and I certainly have not any belief in my father's wealth. That City house he has belonged to all his life is very big and pompous and all that, but it is my firm opinion that it is rotten."

"Algy, for goodness' sake don't circulate such a report. You scarcely know the damage it might do you."

"Not to another creature but you, my dear Fleming, would I say it for the world; but here, *unter vier Augen*, as the Germans say, allow me to repeat what I said at starting, namely, that I do not believe in the prospect of a sou; that I am in love with a pretty girl with money, to whom for that reason in honour I can't propose; and that if I were not of a naturally cheery disposition, I should throw up the cards and cut off to China or some heathenish place. As it is I shall stick to the old craft and trust to luck."

"Have you ever had any thoughts of yourself going into the City house?"

"The governor won't have it at any price. Of course he thinks I should find out far too much; so he gives me £300 a year to keep me quiet, and I amuse myself till the bubble bursts."

"And what then?"

"What then? Heaven knows. Turn billiard-marker I should think would be about the form."

"My dear Algy, I hope you are mistaken."

"So do I with all my heart; but though I know nothing, there are outward signs which make me suspect a good deal. By Jove! there is Harry Durant—I have not seen him since we went to Pompeii together a year ago. Hullo, Durant! Well met in Paris! When did you come?"

"Only a few hours ago. Fleming, too, as I live! Why, this is a pleasant surprise."

"Come on and dine," shouted Algy; "we are starving." He would scarcely have been a true specimen of the *jeunesse dorée* if he had not added the talent of the *gourmet* to his other qualifications.

So the three men adjourned to the Café Anglais, where the ordering of the dinner was entrusted by mutual consent to Algy.

CHAPTER VII.

"SO VERY UNEXPECTED."

LIGHTS, flowers, music, gay toilettes, the stereotyped paraphernalia attendant on one of society's brilliant gatherings. Mrs. Fitzalan's reception was in all this but a facsimile of many previous ones, while she, moving gracefully about, in her rich soft silk, uttered those pleasant nothings which make every one feel the agreeable sensation of receiving an individual welcome. Never, however, did she take her eyes off the door; she watched it with an uneasy interest such as the entrance of mere ordinary guests would be scarcely likely to evoke.

The rooms are tolerably full, and the usual babel of many tongues is heard on all sides. Mrs. Fitzalan's lower lip is seen to quiver, her eyes to sparkle suddenly, as though nerving herself for some expected trial, but she walks forward with a firm step, and receives with her sweetest smile and most delicately-turned compliment Mrs. and the Misses Bertrand.

For a second her eyes and Mrs. Bertrand's meet, but she neither flinches nor quails, only expresses a hope that the acquaintance begun to-night by Lady Montagu's kind intervention may strengthen and develop; and thus, almost patronized, Mrs. Bertrand passes into the room, where, surrounded by many friends, she speedily forgets the momentary fancy which suggested that Mrs. Fitzalan's pale chiselled features were not wholly strange to her. Somewhere on the great highway of the world they had met before, though of the name Fitzalan, save as it belonged to the fashionable English leader in Paris, Mrs. Bertrand had never heard. It must be a mistake. Yet Mrs. Bertrand, with her cold grey eyes, her wary shrewdness, and her keen perception, is scarcely prone to mistakes. The wife of a rich man, worldly prosperity had smiled on her, and there was little she could desire on earth that she did not obtain; still Mrs. Bertrand was always striving to double her opportunities. Everybody, everything, she regarded as mere puppets, to be made in some way conducive to her welfare, and she read people through and through, canvassed their present histories and their antecedents, took stock of their possessions, and then cultivated them or let them down as she thought they might be useful or the reverse. With such proclivities could she be otherwise than repellent, or was it strange that women shrank from her, while men smiled at her wiles, and looked upon her as "a match-making mamma" of the most offensive type? Such was the mistress of Swinton Hall and the mother of the girl Algy Duncombe had declared

to be the "prettiest, sweetest, loveliest girl in Christendom." Well might he quake over his father's unsubstantial position and groan over his own monetary shortcomings, for with such a mother as was May's the settlements were likely to prove very real indeed. The bitter disappointment of Mrs. Bertrand's life had been not having a son to inherit the old place and name; for though the girls were to a certain extent co-heiresses, yet, in default of a male heir, a large share of property which Mr. Bertrand had inherited from his mother would go to Harry Durant, as the son of his only sister. This was gall and wormwood to Mrs. Bertrand, who hated Harry Durant for the fact that he had "elected to exist." But having unfortunately been born into the world, ay, and having grown up in it too, the next best thing Mrs. Bertrand could devise was that he should marry either May or Rose, and thus keep the broad acres undivided. This, however, was, unluckily, more easily said than done.

"Mr. Durant's roaming tastes and love for art were so provoking. They had taken Florence in their way on purpose to see him when they were in Italy, and it *was* trying to find him associating with a set of dirty low Bohemians and wearing the seediest clothes, which he chose to call picturesque—no, he certainly was not a man she had any respect for; but money weighs heavier than respect, and under dear May's influence or sweet Rose's winning smile perhaps Harry might improve."

But Harry, having quite as great a share of worldly acumen as that possessed by his dear aunt, was quite even with her intentions, designated her "a wily trickster," and looked much less at his pretty, fresh young cousins than he would otherwise have done. The nearer Mrs. Bertrand thought she was to success in any finessing she had arranged for the purpose of throwing Mr. Durant into the society of "the girls," the farther she invariably found herself from the point; for he carried her on out of a sheer

love for fun, and then threw her over at the last moment. Neither May nor Rose cared a button for him—of that he felt very sure—or he was far too honourable to have played with their feelings; but a passage-at-arms with the old lady was too amusing to be foregone. That Harry Durant was going to settle in London was a piece of intelligence which had reached her that day in a round-about way, and she was proportionately elated. “Surely he had some thoughts of marrying, or he would not talk of settling.” And Mrs. Bertrand resolved to cut short the Paris campaign, where nothing particular was going on, and return to the charge in her own country. One of Mrs. Bertrand’s severest rules was—never for a moment to lose sight of her love-birds: May and Rose were not allowed to stray from her side, her eye was always upon them, her ear open to catch every sentence that passed between them and their acquaintances, whether male or female. “None of these newfangled American innovations for her, by which your English gentlewomen are allowed to come and go, chaff and laugh, as if they were dairymaids or milliners’ apprentices.”

So at Mrs. Fitzalan’s party May and Rose remained demure and almost silent by their mother’s side, in strict accordance with French habits, but affording an immense amount of hilarity to the many independent young Americans in which the society abounded. Algy Duncombe had just come in, and for a moment a bright colour had spread itself over May’s tell-tale face, when Rose cried out with girlish spontaneity—

“Oh, mamma, there is cousin Harry!”

Mrs. Bertrand turned round with a start. “Could it be possible that he had come back to Paris to meet them?”

Mr. Durant had already advanced into the centre of the room, accompanied by Sir Hubert Fleming, who had presumed on his intimacy with Mrs. Fitzalan to introduce

his friend without asking the usual permission; for had she not repeatedly assured him that any friend of his was always welcome? A mere general assertion; how frequently uttered, yet how seldom fraught with real meaning!

To judge by the almost livid hue which spread itself over Mrs. Fitzalan's face as her eye fell on Harry Durant's cheerful countenance, it could scarcely be doubted that he was a most unwelcome guest. She gave two or three little gasps, and then for a moment she stood rigid, looking at him—all her prettily turned compliments and gracious hostess-airs had forsaken her. To Sir Hubert it seemed as if some sudden affection of the heart had seized her, and he was about to suggest leading her into the outer air, when Mr. Durant put out his hand, with a smile.

"I am glad to meet you again under happy auspices, but sorry to see you looking so ill."

She suffered him to take her hand, of which even through the glove he noted the icy coldness. Another gasp, and the whispered words came slowly out—

"This—is—so—very—unexpected."

"More unexpected than pleasant, I am afraid," he said, laughing. "I fancied you were too accomplished a representative of what Society demands from her chief actresses to have allowed the meeting with an old friend to affect you thus."

Mrs. Fitzalan had been slowly recovering herself while he spoke, and she managed to answer huskily—

"True—true, one must not give way to impulses. You are right; in future I must study the art of forgetting."

She strove hard to make her words playful, but there was a strange dissonance in their tone.

"Ah, I see my aunt and cousins are here; pardon me for a moment if I go and speak to them. We will have our talk together later."

As he moved from her side she laid her hand on his

arm, and in a voice so low as to reach his ear alone she whispered—

“Harry—for God’s sake—be merciful.”

A fiercer look than it was wont to exhibit burnt for a moment on his face; then it relaxed into its usual pleasant, almost tender smile.

“To-night at least you have no cause to fear.” And he passed on. Before the surrounding guests had had time to notice anything remarkable in Mrs. Fitzalan’s reception of the new-comer, he was talking to his “dear aunt” and carrying on a cousinly flirtation with May and Rose, thus sheltering Algy Duncombe’s more decided attentions; while Mrs. Fitzalan took Sir Hubert’s arm, and under pretext of a sudden indisposition begged the baronet, who had been a silent but surprised witness of the little scene, to escort her into the fresh air and get her some wine.

“Have you known Mrs. Fitzalan long? I had not the slightest idea you were acquainted with her,” Mrs. Bertrand is saying to her nephew.

“I have come here to-night as Sir Hubert Fleming’s friend,” is the ambiguous reply. “One of the privileged, you see, for I believe it is a privilege to be admitted as one of Mrs. Fitzalan’s guests.”

“Yes, this house is quite the rage. It is our first appearance here; yet I cannot think when I have seen our hostess before—her face seems quite familiar to me.”

“A mere likeness, I should imagine,” he answered, smiling. “It is wonderful we do not trace resemblances more frequently, when we consider how many thousands of faces pass before our eyes in a year.”

“Oh, I am not a painter, and consequently not a physiognomist,” was the tart and somewhat irrelevant reply; “but I feel strongly inclined to the belief that I have seen Mrs. Fitzalan before. Doubtless I shall recollect where it was.”

Mr. Durant shrugged his shoulders, and by way of changing the conversation inquired after his uncle's health, and upset some of Mrs. Bertrand's air-castles by announcing that he had not known that they were in Paris till he came into the room that evening.

The temporary weakness past, the hostess returned, and joining the group of talkers, introduced Sir Hubert Fleming to the Bertrands. She looked white, calm, and stately; evidently for some reason she felt herself to be in an anomalous position, yet she resolved, if possible, to remain mistress of the situation. Only Harry Durant noted her occasionally *distract* answer, or remarked how her glance every now and then wandered to his face, as though seeking a cue for future action. He could not help admiring her for what he was pleased to consider "her bravery," and once or twice proffered her the assistance for which she mutely asked by leading his tiresome and inquisitive aunt's thoughts in some other channel when her questions were likely to prove too difficult for Mrs. Fitzalan to answer, being as she was under the surveillance of Harry Durant's truth-knowing eye. If she could have guessed that Mr. Durant was likely to put in an appearance, she would not have hampered herself with the Bertrands, but now the only thing left to be done was to exhaust herself in civilities; and by the time the last guest had departed and the candles had sunk low into the sockets, Mrs. Fitzalan's little remnant of vitality seemed to be flickering too, and she threw herself on her sofa, as though energy and hope were alike dead and euthanasia were all she craved.

In the hall there is a hum of voices; and the outer door being still open, the cheery laughter of her guests may be heard as they descend the stairs, but her drawing-room is closed and she is alone. Once more, however, the door opens, and Harry Durant's bearded face, like a spectre out of the old past, appears before her.

"Not to-night—not to-night," she says, pleadingly; "I

can bear no more to-night. It is scarcely consistent with your vaunted courtesy to torture a woman thus."

"Torture, my dear madam! What have I said? The torture exists solely in your own thoughts."

"The sight of you has recalled much that I had hoped now was dead for ever."

"Then you have lately received some news?"

"I have heard nothing," she said, softly. "What is there to hear?"

"No letters—no intelligence of any kind has reached you?"

"None since I first saw Mrs. Bertrand in the Bois and by the same day's post was told she was in Paris."

"Ah! She is searching, vainly at present, in her memory for a likeness. Shrewd though she is, you recollect faces better than she does; or perhaps you are more changed than is Mrs. Bertrand."

"If you had not been here I should have managed better."

"Possibly; but *rouge* sometimes turns up when we back *noir*, as doubtless you have proved."

"What has brought you to Paris, Mr. Durant?"

"Well—various things—some bearing reference directly, some indirectly, to yourself. But it is growing very late, and you look faded and pale—suppose we defer our talk till to-morrow?"

"When you will," she answered, in the tone of one with whom free agency no longer exists. "Only tell me—is it to be war or peace between us?"

"Which means, am I going to back you up and let you go on your way rejoicing, or am I going to turn scandal-monger and relate for the amusement of every coterie in Paris sundry peccadilloes which happen to have come to my knowledge?"

She bowed her head, but did not speak.

"Well, my dear Mrs.— Fitzalan" (the name came

out with a degree of hesitancy at which the lady winced), "this is a question I cannot answer to-night—much as I regret the amount of sleeplessness uncertainty may occasion. Much—very much of the future is in your own hands, as far at least as I am concerned. When I have said my say it will be for you to decide the peace or war question. *A demain.*"

And he was gone—once more she was alone, with the inclination strong upon her to throw up the cards forthwith, and continue no longer this unequal combat for position in which she was engaged single-handed against society's world.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE VICARAGE.

SINCE Old Peter's death, or more truly perhaps since Mr. Durant left for Paris, Cicely has ceased to be a child. The games on the village green have lost their charm, the prattle of her juvenile acquaintance its former interest. A new era is opening before her, a new life dawning in the future. When not actually in the presence of the good vicar, who insists on a practical view of things as they substantially exist, she is dreaming in her own room, and turns a deaf ear to nurse Frizby's impatient injunctions that she should come and help her with her housewifely duties.

To think that the girl should mourn so long for Peter passes the woman's comprehension, "for he was not so over-companionable of these later years." She could not look beyond the surface of the matter, and failed to see how Peter was Cicely's one only prop and friend, and that

in losing him she instinctively felt that she was on the brink of troubled waters. Ay, the sluices were removed, although she scarcely realized it, and the great torrent of the world was about to pour down in its resistless force. The peaceful Swinton days were nearly over—of this Cicely felt very sure, though what that unknown space was like which lay beyond the glades and lanes which surrounded the quiet village she knew not, but her vivid imagination was ceaselessly sketching unreal pictures of that world of which she knew nothing save from books alone.

Peter's death had awakened an immense amount of gossip in the village—it was so sudden and strange; and though "the crowner" who sat on the body had judged it to be from "nat'ral causes," yet the people whispered tales of foul play which might or might not have any foundation. Dreaded rather than loved during his life, the country folk about were awed by Peter's "fearsome death," and many of the remarks which reached Cicely's ears when she was among her old acquaintances shocked her, and perhaps induced her to keep more than ever aloof from them and wish that something, no matter what, might happen to take her away from that dreadful place where she had once been so happy. Every day the girl drooped more and more, and longed for change, till all her bright colour had fled; the attributes of the lily rather than the rose were fast becoming hers, and even the vicar was compelled to recognize the necessity of at once adopting some plan of action for the girl's immediate welfare. Should he send her to the sea with nurse Frizby, or should he open his well-worn purse-strings, and from his slender savings send her to a boarding-school somewhere right away? To look on the matter closely, it was hard on the vicar that this girl should be thrown on his hands without a friend in the wide world to whom he felt justified in turning for counsel. If the Bertrands were only at the

Hall he might have asked the squire for advice—he was a kindly man, who would have discussed the state of affairs with him most willingly ; while May and Rose had always noticed Cicely, and would have helped to rouse her now. Should he write to Mrs. Bertrand ? An inner voice answered decidedly in the negative ; her only reply would be, “ Send her out as a housemaid, and let her work for her living. Why on earth do you trouble either yourself or me about her ? ”

In the midst of these reflections and doubting moments, during which the Rev. Mr. Burke was sorely perplexed in his mind, a letter arrived bearing the Paris postmark. He carried it into his study, and with his spectacles well planted on his nose read and re-read it with the keenest attention ; then, having carefully placed it in his pocket, he went out, without speaking to any one, on a solitary ramble. With his soft pastoral hat pulled down on his brows, his hands crossed behind him, and his shoulders bent forward almost into a curve, the worthy vicar, for the time at least, had lost much of that philosophical *sans souci*ance which Mr. Durant had accused him of having possessed in the past. He was obviously placed in a difficult position. It is easy enough to some minds to accept the inevitable, but troublesome in the extreme to be compelled to choose whether this or that path will be the more advantageous to follow. In some such dilemma Mr. Burke found himself at this juncture ; and to a man who was no longer in the fullest vigour of his mental strength, and whose energies had been impaired by the inanition attendant on a dronish village life, it was no enviable position. It was not that Mr. Burke was naturally a weak man—under different circumstances his faculties of mind might have developed into power ; but they had lain fallow so long that indecision and a longing for some other mind to lean on had crept on him without perhaps his own cognizance, till now an occasion presented itself in which he must choose one of two ways—the uphill,

difficult road of action and determination, or the easy downhill path of passive acquiescence in the opinions and doings of other people. Had Mr. Burke's own personal welfare been at stake in the matter, he would probably have sacrificed it to his love of ease, but it was on Cicely's account that he was harassing and vexing his brain. The vicar was thoroughly unselfish, and he would invariably give himself more trouble and thought for his fellow-men than for himself.

Should he let Cicely go and plunge, under what externally seemed advantageous auspices, into the great vortex of the outer world, or should he come forward, adopt her as his own child, and keep her there, shielding her from harm in the quiet village? Had he the right to do this? he was asking himself on the one side while on the other the dread would force itself of what the world would make of her if it were allowed to stamp its imprint on her ductile nature. To propound the question to Cicely herself would, he felt, be most unsatisfactory. What could she know of the difficulties and temptations of life; and was she not even now, girl-like, longing for a change? Young people were always on the look-out for action, and was it to be supposed that Cicely would be dissimilar to others? No, he would not mention the matter to her—there was no especial reason for an immediate decision; he would watch her narrowly for the next few days, and strive, if possible, to gain from her manner and remarks some clue as to what would be the best to do for her in the future. Thus, like most undecided people, by procrastination he hoped for help. And so, after a two hours' walk through autumn-tinted woods, he once more reached the vicarage and sat down to his midday meal, which he invited Cicely to come and share—a privilege to which she had not previously been admitted, having always eaten with nurse Frizby. It was an honour, no doubt, to be admitted to the vicar's table, but Cicely scarcely appreciated it as such.

She was a little bit shy of talking to the vicar as an equal ; and, moreover, nurse Frizby's strictures on " the likes of her being admitted to dine with the master " were anything but pleasing. Altogether Cicely's life was scarcely a bed of roses ; and if Mr. Burke had asked her whether she would go and seek fortune with strangers, or stay and be the light of his hearth, there is little doubt but that she would have elected for the former. But she was not to have the choice—at all events, not yet.

And two or three days passed on, the vicar bestowing on Cicely her customary instruction, and then keeping her by his side longer than usual, giving up the reading of dry books, in which he spent the greater portion of his leisure hours, striving to bring his mind and the girl's on the same level, in order to ascertain, if possible, whether that affinity existed between them which should form the basis of mutual regard and happiness if they dwelt together in the future. Still, the vicar, when he thought the matter over, was not satisfied. Cicely in no way responded to the interest he evinced for her ; all her youth and girlishness seemed deadened, and the vicar was powerless to awaken in her a new life. He was resolved, however, not to be conquered without a struggle, and tried every means he knew to please and divert her mind ; but games had lost their zest, and the books he provided she called prosy and dull, while, if she had truthfully given her opinion, she would have said that " life at the vicarage was a poor thing—not even comparable with the old days at the lodge."

Thus heavily to Cicely, and unsuccessfully to the vicar, did several days pass, till a second letter from Paris upset once more his mental calculations, and kept the good man closeted for several hours in the privacy of his sanctum, while Cicely was left to roam at will through the Swinton woods. When she came back, her cheeks having regained some of their old roses during her ramble, Mr. Burke was standing at the door of the vicarage.

"I am so sorry to be late ; I hope I have not kept you waiting, sir," cried Cicely in some dismay, for the hour of the usual midday meal, which she always took with the vicar now, was long past.

"No, child, no ; I have been engaged, and have not thought of the time."

"I am so glad ! I was afraid you would be angry with me, sir. I forget that I ought to keep regular hours now. Poor grand-dad let me come in when I liked."

"So !" And the vicar looked grave, for he did not appreciate the distance she would maintain between them, but he spoke kindly. "I trust you enjoyed your walk. You look brighter and rosier than usual."

"Ah ! yes, it is very pretty in the woods. I went down as far as the old mill by the dam—daddy took me there sometimes. I wonder why he liked that walk so much ? Odd we should find him lying not far from there, wasn't it, sir ? I didn't pass that place, though." And Cicely put her hand before her eyes, as though to shut out recollection.

"Come in, child, come in and have some dinner. I have had a letter to-day which may interest you—I want to tell you about it."

Cicely took her hand from her face and looked at him in surprise—there was no one, she thought, in the wide world who could write letters to interest her.

"A letter !" she said. "I don't know anybody who writes letters."

"This letter is from Paris."

"Ah, Mr. Durant !" The girl's face broke into a sudden look of gladness, such as it had not worn for weeks, and the vicar could scarcely forego an exclamation of pain.

"Why should you guess the letter to be from Mr. Durant ?" he asked.

"Because there is no one else in the whole world whose letter could interest me."

"Well, come in, come in"—for they were still loitering at the door,—“Frizby is ready with the dinner.”

“And afterwards you will read me the letter? Oh, how good of you, sir!”

“I did not say so; but I will tell you a portion of its contents.”

Cicely ran joyfully upstairs to take off her hat and reduce her hair into tidy order, the vicar meantime looking sorrowful, almost stern. That Harry Durant’s missive had at once aroused the interest he had so utterly failed to awaken was no pleasing thought, and Cicely’s brightened countenance as she sat down at the table did not contribute to his satisfaction. The dinner was eaten almost in silence, for the vicar was moody and disinclined for conversation. Ill-natured people might have suggested that he was out of temper; and Cicely never spoke to him unless he addressed her. At last, however, nurse Frizby had removed all the plates and passed away into the kitchen precincts.

“He must produce the letter now; what a long time he is!” thought Cicely; and when the vicar pushed away his chair, and, seating himself in the window, called her to come to him, she felt as if something very dreadful was going to happen.

“Cicely, should you like to go to Paris?” asked the vicar, putting on the sternest manner he knew how to assume. “Or would you rather remain on here in the vicarage?”

There! the question which had been giving him so much anxious thought was out at last.

“Go to Paris!” she cried. “Oh, how delightful! But who to? Is Mr. Durant going to take care of me? He promised daddy he would—he told me so.”

“Mr. Durant will have nothing whatever to do with you. You are talking of what you do not understand. A lady in Paris has offered to take charge of you, if you would like to go.”

"A lady! Is she nice? Have I ever seen her?" And Cicely's countenance fell.

"You must find all that out for yourself, my dear child, if you decide to go."

"Please, sir, can I come back here if I don't like her?"

"Yes, Cicely, certainly. You will always find a home here, if that new one to which you are invited is not a happy one."

"Thank you, sir; then I think I should like to go. But I shall see Mr. Durant, shall I not?"

"I don't know—perhaps. But you ask very few questions about the lady who has written to invite you to go to her."

"Oh, I shall find out what she is like when I get there, and if I don't like her I shall come back. What is her name, sir?"

"Mrs. Fitzalan."

"Mrs. Fitzalan! Did grand-dad know her? I seem to remember the name—let me think. Ah, I saw it once written on an old letter in the lodge."

"If Mrs. Fitzalan did not know something of you she would scarcely have offered you a home," said the vicar, ambiguously. "I need not write to her to-day. You can think the matter over till to-morrow morning, and give me an answer then."

"Oh, you may write at once, sir. If you don't object, I should like to go and see what Paris and this lady are like, especially if grand-dad knew her."

So about the future, over which age had been wavering for the last ten days, youth decided in as many minutes, only reserving the power to retrace her steps, if she were roughly handled in that outer world of which she knew nothing. Cicely had yet to learn how impossible is retrogression.

CHAPTER IX.

“AS HER OWN CHILD.”

“MRS. FITZALAN is ill.”

“Ah, she looked as though a fit of indisposition were coming on at her reception,” was the announcement and comment passing from mouth to mouth in the coterie to which the fair widow belonged, two days after the memorable evening when Mr. Durant had put in so unexpected an appearance. The little world in which Mrs. Fitzalan moved failed, however, to discover that on the day following her “at home” she had, after a sleepless night, received the gentleman in question in the strictest privacy, and that two hours of earnest conversation had reduced her to such a state of utter collapse as to make Victorine send forthwith for the doctor who usually attended her. Harry Durant, with his cheerful face and pleasing manners, was not formidable to women as a rule, yet he seemed to be more than a match for Mrs. Fitzalan, and to be the one man she dreaded above all others to meet. What he had said to her no one save they two knew, but the livid hue of her features, the slow movement of her pulse, told their own tale of how the memories which had been awakened in that conversation had proved almost too much for her physical strength, and left her struggling to retain a feeble spark of consciousness and vitality.

The doctor ordered complete quiet and rest. No worries, no sounds of busy life, were to reach her. He was counted clever in his profession, yet in this instance he failed to remember that at times there is an undercurrent of knowledge on which it is more dangerous to dwell than on the petty troubles of daily existence, for they perhaps help to

lighten the secret burden which the overfreighted wayfarer finds so difficult to carry.

Mrs. Fitzalan was the pampered queen of Parisian fêtes—how could he guess that she was suffering from aught—save the fatigue engendered by ceaseless gaiety? For two long days she lay in her darkened room, till mind and body could stand captivity no longer. She would go to Compiègne for a week, and see if she could recover her nervous power. Though the season was nearly over for country haunts, the change might yet prove beneficial. At all events, she would escape the sight of familiar faces, and be saved the daily repetition of conventionalities which palled on and sickened her. The doctor who was in attendance gave his ready concurrence, for, truth to say, Mrs. Fitzalan's sudden indisposition puzzled him; and if change did not effect a cure, he was at a loss to know how it could be brought about. So for a time Paris lost its reigning favourite; and when, after three days had elapsed, Harry Durant found his way once more to Mrs. Fitzalan's apartments, he was informed, "*Madame est à la campagne—ah si, there was a little letter for monsieur.*"

He tore it open and walked down a side-avenue.

"The siren fled! *Tiens!* I am sorry. I thought there was more fight in her. By Jove! no, she accepts my terms. Well, it cuts an unpleasantly difficult knot. I have brought a rare amount of responsibility on my own shoulders though, I am afraid; but never mind, my *blasé* faculties are considerably below par—a little excitement may prove beneficial. She is concise, this good lady, but her note is to the point, and that is everything."

"Mrs. Fitzalan will receive Mr. Durant's *protégée*, and treat her as though she were her own child," were the words contained in the brief missive which Harry Durant carefully laid away in his pocket-book with other more or less valuable documents.

"Treat her as her own child," he murmured to himself

s he did so. "I wonder how she would treat her own child? I don't envy it especially. But Cicely shall not be ill-used. I have brought about this amalgamation, and I must see to its consequences." And he traversed with a light step the few streets which divided Mrs. Fitzalan's abode from that in which his near relations the Bertrands dwelt.

"They were at home, charmed to see Harry—so naughty of him not to have been there before! What could he have to do in Paris that all his time was employed? Surely his relations had some claim. Really, he must sit down and relate minutely where he had been and what he had been doing."

Mr. Durant smiled and bore the stream of shallow talk equably; so much so that Mrs. Bertrand thought he was improved, and began to have hopes of him in the end. He used to be so very irritable at times, and take them up so short if the girls chanced to say a silly thing, which was not an event of infrequent occurrence. What could have happened to make his manner so much less bearish?

"Un monsieur qui demande madame."

A shade passes over Mrs. Bertrand's brow at the idea of an intruder at that special moment, when the wheels of Harry's conversation with the girls are gliding along so easily; the shade deepens into a frown when she perceives the inopportune visitor to be Mr. Duncombe. It is not lost on Harry, who gives an amused chuckle.

"Well met, Algy!" he exclaims, holding out his hand to the new-comer. "My fair cousins and I were having a discussion on the different tastes in dress exhibited by French and English ladies. You know more of the subject than I do—give your opinion."

"You, Harry, being an artist, ought to be a greater authority than Mr. Duncombe," suggested the mamma, somewhat tartly.

"I know you have a contempt for the profession; yet

artists are not milliners, my dear aunt. It is for you ladies to study the details; we only pretend to appreciate a general effect."

"Which very few women in our country know how to produce," remarked Algy Duncombe.

"There, young ladies, he has joined your ranks without knowing it, and declares for the French. I am not with him," exclaimed Mr. Durant.

"Stop, stop, stop! For freshness, simplicity, and grace an English maiden bears off the palm—who can think otherwise?" cried Algy, in a hurry to remove any slur which he feared he might have conveyed to his compatriots by his first remark. "But for knowledge in the secret art '*de réparer des ans l'irréparable outrage*,' commend me to the French—with one English woman alone excepted."

"Who is she?" asked both the girls in a breath.

"Who can it be but Mrs. Fitzalan?"

"Ah, yes, she dresses beautifully, but looks haggard," said Mrs. Bertrand. "Don't you think so, Harry?"

"She was ill the evening you were there; in fact, I hear she has gone away for a few days for change of air. Probably she will have recovered her looks by the time she returns to Paris."

"Do you know her well, Harry?"

"My dear aunt, that is a difficult question to answer, involving an immense range of complex statements. In the first place, what is the exact meaning of the term 'to know a lady well'?"

"Oh, how tiresome you are! You know what I mean. Are you intimate with her?"

"I have the honour of Mrs. Fitzalan's acquaintance. The degree of intimacy to which she admits me is for her, not for me to reveal." And Mr. Durant bowed stiffly.

"At any rate, you can tell us whether she is English or American, and all about her."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Her accent never struck

me as being that of an American, though I believe she has been in the country."

"Then you do not really know where she comes from? How odd, if you are intimate with her."

"Pardon me, my dear aunt, I did not admit the intimacy."

"No one is really intimate with Mrs. Fitzalan, and no one knows anything about her save that she is the fashion," Algy Duncombe struck in. Be it remembered he was scarcely an admirer of the widow, morally speaking, though on the subject of her grace and taste it would have been difficult to cavil. "She has appeared very suddenly in the arena of social life, and perchance she may some day as suddenly leave it."

"Are you better informed than the rest of the world, Algy, my boy, that you so rashly commit yourself to these assertions?" asked Mr. Durant, smiling.

"Oh, I don't know anything for certain," answered the young man, testily, "but somehow I am not so infatuated about the lady as some people are."

"Mrs. Fitzalan has probably not included Mr. Algernon Duncombe in her list of favourites," was Mrs. Bertrand's sneering remark, under the point of which poor Algy collapsed and took refuge in making occasional *sotto voce* speeches to May; while Mrs. Bertrand plied the main line of the conversation with her nephew.

"It is strange, Harry, is it not, how that woman's face haunts me—I cannot think where I have seen it before. You say you do not know whether she is an American or not. Where can I have seen her?"

"You can scarcely expect me to know all the people you meet as you travel about. My uncle would be more likely to assist you."

"Oh, he never remembers any one. Besides, he has not seen Mrs. Fitzalan. It puzzles me dreadfully. I shall not rest till I find out where we have met before. I wonder if she has any recollection of me?"

Mr. Durant shrugged his shoulders again, as though the subject had but little interest for him; and, changing it somewhat abruptly, he asked if the news of the old lodge-keeper's death had not shocked her.

"Why, how did you know he was dead?"

"I had gone down to Swinton, hoping to find you at the Hall; and being disappointed, was dining and sleeping at Burke's when it happened."

"Good gracious, you had gone to Swinton to find us! How nice of you, Harry! You always were a dear, thoughtful boy." (Mr. Durant winced almost perceptibly.) "Yes, it was very horrid about Peter; but he was getting old and very useless. We can't make up our minds whom we shall put in his place—one of the gardeners, I think."

"Peter has left a grand-daughter," remarked Mr. Durant, softly, watching his aunt carefully as he spoke.

"Yes, but she will not do for the lodge; she is too young."

"No, I did not suppose so; yet she must be provided for. She is at the vicarage now, under nurse Frizby's care."

"At the vicarage! What a fool Mr. Burke is! He always manages to saddle himself with other people's troubles. So he has taken the responsibility of that girl—why does he not get her into a laundry or dairy or something?"

"Oh, mamma, Cicely is quite above work of that sort," cried Rose, with youthful energy, receiving a pleased smile from cousin Harry for her interference.

"Don't talk nonsense, child," was, however, her mother's answer. "You and May between you have helped to turn Cicely's head; and the sooner it is put back into the proper place on her shoulders the better."

"It has been suggested that she should go as companion to some lady, and it was thought you might perhaps interest yourself in the matter," said Mr. Durant, quietly.

"I? Good gracious! whoever suggested such a thing? No, I will give her a character for a place, but I won't help her out of her sphere. I don't approve of it on principle. Class distinctions should be regarded, I maintain. As a member of an old Tory family, I am surprised at you, Harry."

"At me? What have I done? I merely said 'it has been suggested.' Who told you I had taken any active part in the matter?"

"Really your uncle must speak to Mr. Burke; it is too absurd if he means to thrust this girl as an equal into the privacy of our home life, only because he has given her a little education. He will be marrying her next."

"Burke married to Cicely! The idea is too funny." And Harry Durant laughed out in his frank, joyous way. "I do not think, my dear aunt, from something I heard to-day, that the poor girl is likely to annoy you long at Swinton. It is not improbable that she will come to Paris."

"To Paris—Cicely—what for?"

"There is a lady here who is more than half inclined to take her as a companion; but as the affair is not settled I am not at liberty to give her name."

"Really, Harry, you do surprise me. Then this has all been done without my interference. I thought you said my assistance had been hoped for?"

"And is so still, to countenance the girl when she arrives."

"Oh, I can't and won't have anything to do with it. I shall speak to your uncle. This is too absurd."

When was Mrs. Bertrand ever known to follow the advice of the husband to whom she was always professedly about to appeal? In this matter she most assuredly would not do so, as he infallibly would be on Cicely's side, who was a great favourite of his. Mr. Bertrand was a good-natured man, who delighted in the self-advancement of his

fellows; and Cicely's luck, as he would designate it, could not fail to interest him. This Mrs. Bertrand knew, and was probably proportionately vexed at the turn Cicely's life-tide was taking.

Her annoyance afforded Mr. Durant far greater amusement than he would have cared to acknowledge; for though he scarcely hoped to obtain a partisan for Cicely in his aunt, yet at the same time he did not fear her. She was a troublesome woman, but scarcely a dangerous one; apt to make waspish, disagreeable remarks, but without a sufficiently good head for intrigue to be able to form her inimical feelings into a damaging plot. There never was much sequence in Mrs. Bertrand's disparagements, and from that very reason they failed in effect. Mr. Durant had taken off the edge of the surprise which he felt sure all the Bertrands would feel when Cicely arrived in Paris, and now, under a pressing invitation to fix an evening when he would come and dine, he rose to take his departure, accompanied by Algy Duncombe, who, having had the luck of ten minutes' quiet flirtation with May, scarcely felt inclined to dare fortune any more that day by remaining to face unsupported Mrs. Bertrand's not over-civil speeches.

CHAPTER X.

MISS FITZALAN.

HARRY DURANT is standing at the station of the Chemin de Fer du Nord, awaiting the arrival of the Calais train, for by that train Cicely is to arrive. She is making all alone her first plunge into life ; for though Mr. Burke accompanied her as far as Folkestone, she has travelled on to Paris without any companions save those chance ones she has met by the way. At her age youth is sanguine and hope is high. Mr. Durant was to meet her—that thought in itself kept fear from intruding, and she talked to her fellow-passengers, who were kind and good-natured to her, as though she had always been accustomed to journey about the world alone, and that an event of no unusual occurrence had been thrust upon her.

Yes, there at last was Harry Durant's cheerful face, so pleasant to look upon, especially as Cicely had at one time quite made up her mind she would never see it again.

" Well, little girl, have you had a cold journey ? Are you tired ? I have chartered a carriage, but we shall have to wait for the luggage. Have you got much ? No, very little. Ah, you will accumulate such a wardrobe in Paris ! "

These cheery tones were very pleasing to Cicely's ears ; and, though she was taken suddenly very shy and silent, yet perhaps for that very reason they made the more impression.

At last they have passed Cicely's slender stock of baggage through the *Douane*, got away from the bewildering crowd, and are seated in the *voiture* Mr. Durant had provided.

"Is the lady I am going to live with very nice?" was Cicely's timid question.

"I hope you will find her so, my child."

"I wonder why she sent for me?"

"Oh, because she thought it would be pleasant to have a young girl to take about. But remember, Cicely, if ever anything happens to annoy you in any way or render you unhappy, you will make a friend of me and tell me, will you not? Promise."

"Oh, yes—whom else should I tell? I don't know anybody."

"But you will have endless acquaintances ere long; only perhaps they may not all be friends."

"Shall I? Well, I am sure I shall not have the courage to talk to them."

"That will come sooner than you expect," he said, laughing; "but recollect I am always to know the worries and troubles, however small."

"Perhaps I shall not have any—I thought I was to be very happy."

"With all my heart I trust and hope you will be; but there never yet was a life without an occasional thunder-shower."

"Mr. Burke did not want me to come. He said I should do much better at Swinton, and if I did not like Paris I was to go back, but I don't think I shall."

"No, my child, neither do I."

Then they talked of the streets and the people, all of which was so new and strange to Cicely; and tired though she was after her journey, she was sorry when this pleasant drive with Mr. Durant came to an end, and she found herself at the door of Mrs. Fitzalan's apartment on the Champs Elysées.

Another minute or two, and she stood in the pretty drawing-room. Hope and change had brought back the roses to her cheeks; and notwithstanding the distance she

had come, there were no travel-stains to dash her youthful freshness. Mrs. Fitzalan rose languidly from her sofa to greet her, and planted a soft kiss on her brow; yet there was no effusiveness in the meeting. Perhaps Harry Durant's presence checked the natural impulse of the woman. For a second they looked at each other straight in the face, these two who were to spend some portion of their lives together; and, strange to say, Mrs. Fitzalan's eye fell, and her cheek paled under the ardent gaze of the girl's passionate speaking eyes.

Something about Cicely's appearance had evidently awakened old memories, and Mrs. Fitzalan turned away to hide a passing emotion. Quickly recovering herself, however, she addressed her new companion, taking her hand kindly in hers as she did so.

"You will be thoroughly at home here, I hope—quite like my own child," she said in her slow soft tones. It was what she had promised Harry Durant, and she repeated the promise now; but was it only because he stood silently v, watching the meeting with that inquisitive, mischievous twinkle which his eyes always gave?

"You will tell me, please, what you wish me to do, and I will try and be obedient," answered Cicely, who felt rather shy in the presence of this languid, well-dressed beauty.

Mrs. Fitzalan smiled.

"I wish you to do nothing, child, but amuse yourself—I don't suppose you will want much telling how to do that."

"Pardon me, *l'art de s'amuser* can only be learnt by study; but this young lady's education is in good hands, if I mistake not," said Mr. Durant, gallantly. "As far as book-learning goes Mr. Burke has not neglected her; the finishing process rests with Mrs. Fitzalan."

The lady thus politely addressed did not answer him directly, but, taking Cicely by the hand, led her to the door.

"I will show the child to her room and come back to you, Mr. Durant."

He stood for a moment or two looking out of the window, whistling—no surer sign of preoccupation in a man. Nor did he turn till Mrs. Fitzalan, gliding up to him with her soft step, was so close as almost to touch him.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked, almost below her breath.

"If the end crowns the beginning I shall be; but we are only at the starting-point. The child is pretty—don't you think so?"

"Lovely; but those eyes haunt me like some evil dream."

"Ah! then you recognize the likeness. It impressed me the instant I saw her."

"Who could fail to be impressed by it? But, Harry, you must help me—you have promised, remember. Taking this child to live with me will involve me in an amount of questioning, intriguing, and manœuvring which I scarcely feel as if I had the courage to encounter."

"Bah! Put it all on one side. I hate intrigues and lies; they always end in the utter discomfiture of the people who employ them."

"But how can I dare to speak the truth?"

"Say nothing."

"Every one will ask me who this girl is."

"A child you have adopted, because a companionless life is irksome to you, and who is henceforth to be known as Miss Fitzalan."

"Must this be so?"

"It must."

"But will not people suspect, and strange whispers get about? You seem to forget what a many-tongued monster is society."

Mr. Durant laughed gaily.

"Have you not yet learnt to live down scandal?" he asked.

"I am well-nigh weary of my life," she murmured. "Both physical and mental power must give way soon. I have been very ill lately."

"Under the influence of this fresh young life, which has come to share and gladden yours, I hope brighter days will dawn. A reparation always brings a certain amount of peace; at least, so the divines say." And, for the first time during any interview Mr. Durant had had with Mrs. Fitzalan in Paris, his manner and voice assumed the tenderness for which he was proverbial with women. By the colour which for a moment mounted to her brow it was evident she noted the change, but she only said very passively—

"I will do my best for her." Then altering her manner, as though with a strong effort, she dashed into lighter topics. "She must have clothes at once; she cannot be presented to my friends in such frightful garments as those she is now wearing."

"Yet black throws up the rich tints of the girl's beauty. Of course, I don't understand the *façon*—that, I dare say, might be thought rather quaint for Paris."

"Black! Why should a baby like that wear black? She is, you say, to bring gladness to my stilled life. I will have nothing but bright colours about her; they will contrast to advantage with my neutral tints."

"And the mourning for her grandfather? She can scarcely set it aside so soon," he suggested.

"Ah! her grandfather—true, I had forgotten. Yet she is to be Miss Fitzalan now, you say?"

"You have a black dress on yourself."

"Oh yes; that is nothing. I often wear black; it suits me." And she talked fast and changed colour. "But this child is quite different."

"Well, settle it according to your conscience; it is no

affair of mine. Only Cicely will have to be consulted a little; I doubt if you will find her altogether an automaton. She was very fond of Old Peter."

"I knew there would be no end of worries and perplexities," said Mrs. Fitzalan, for her very testily. "I hope she will not talk much about him; I cannot stand that."

"No; lodge-keeper antecedents will not give her much *prestige*, will they? She must be taught to restrain her natural emotions—another lesson which you will doubtless be able to give." And the cynical jar in Mr. Durant's voice awakened Mrs. Fitzalan's usually slumbering anger, for she answered, shortly—

"And which lessons you will make it your business to counteract on every possible occasion."

"*C'est depend.*" And he walked away and took up his hat. "I shall leave you now to become acquainted with your fair charge. *Au revoir* in a day or two, when, the toilettes under your supervision being completed, Paris shall be surprised into recognizing a new beauty."

They did not shake hands; for some reason they had seldom shaken hands since they had remet in Paris; but Mrs. Fitzalan bowed her head as he passed her, and a sense of relief that he was gone came to her almost with a cry. She did not go at once to look for Cicely, but stood leaning against a chair, while many tumultuous emotions swept through her brain with a force which nearly overset her physical strength. Did she mean to do her duty by the girl she had just received as an inmate of her home—make reparation, as Harry Durant had suggested?

Seriously and honestly she did. Yet to have this girl, who all unwittingly embodied so many old memories, always about her path, was a trial almost greater than Mrs. Fitzalan's strength could endure. She had, however, consented to make the effort, and she must arm herself with courage for the fight.

Mrs. Fitzalan was still standing lost in thought when the door opened softly, and Cicely, who had grown tired of being left to her own meditations, glided timidly into the room.

"May I come in? I heard Mr. Durant go away, so I thought perhaps you would not mind."

"Yes, dear, certainly; I was about to seek you. Come and sit by me, and let us have a talk." And Mrs. Fitzalan shook off the dreams which hung about her, and twined her arm affectionately round Cicely as she led her to the sofa. "Do you think you shall like me, child?"

"I don't know, but I hope so," said Cicely, who, honest of purpose as she was by nature, did not give way to flattery. "I wonder why you asked me to come and live with you? Would you mind telling me, please?"

Mrs. Fitzalan, who had been looking earnestly into the girl's eyes, answered promptly—

"Because we are both lonely. I have no near relations on earth; neither, I believe, have you—at least, so Mr. Durant told me."

"No; there is no one now poor old grand-dad is gone; and though Mr. Burke was very kind to me, I was so glad to get away from Swinton."

"Why?"

"Because I never should have got the sight of poor grandfather as he lay under the tree in the wood where I found him that night out of my mind, if I had stayed there for ever."

A twinge as of pain passed over Mrs. Fitzalan's face as Cicely spoke, and, closing her eyes, she laid her head back on the cushions.

"Never mind me, dear; I have not been very well lately. Tell me all about your grandfather's death—it will do you good to talk it out for once, and then we must try and forget it."

"Oh, that I never can," cried Cicely, "it was so very

awful, and grand-dad was so good to me—poor dear grand-dad! Yet there was always a mystery about him. I often think about it now that he has gone, and wonder what it could have been. Do you think he could ever have done any very wicked thing, Mrs. Fitzalan? If so, ought we not to pray that he may be forgiven?"

"My child, no; the sins that were committed were not his. Deal tenderly with his memory."

"Did you know grandfather, Mrs. Fitzalan?"

She did not open her eyes, but lay quite passively there, only softly said—

"I have heard of him from Mr. Durant."

"Ah, Mr. Durant was with him when he died. I often wish I had been there. Mr. Burke says it is a great privilege to be by the dying bed of those we love, and I think it is—don't you?"

"Yes, dear, certainly; but why were you not there? You were within reach."

"I was silly, and had let the sight of blood frighten me so that I was afraid of looking at it again. I am so sorry now. I shall never forgive myself for not being with dear grand-dad when he died. Don't you think it was very wrong and wicked of me?"

"Oh, I don't know, child; I am scarcely competent to give an opinion on what is right or wrong in others—my own shortcomings are too numerous."

"Yours? I am so glad! I was afraid you would be quite perfect."

Mrs. Fitzalan opened her eyes and smiled faintly as she took Cicely's hand in hers.

"We will try and help each other, my love; and by way of beginning let us talk on some less mournful subject."

"One little question first," said Cicely, eagerly. "You are so kind I do not mind asking you. Who do you think it could have been grand-dad wrote to that last night?"

He took the letter into the village and posted it himself. It was on his way back that he fell in the wood. Do you think perhaps I may have a relation—a mother or father—somewhere ? ”

Mrs. Fitzalan sprang from the lounging position she had assumed with a sudden start, and put her hand on her heart, as though overcome by an access of violent pain; while Cicely looked on in serious alarm. In a second or two she sat down again.

“A spasm of the heart. Don’t be frightened. I am subject to these attacks, and they pass as suddenly as they come. What were you saying ? Oh, about a letter. I dare say it was nothing very important. I should not speak of it if I were you. In fact, Cicely—you will not, I hope, think me unkind for saying so—but the less you allude to your grandfather the better. You are my adopted child now, about to be introduced to the best society in Paris; and he—well, he scarcely belonged to the same world.”

“Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, whatever happens I can never forget grand-dad. He did love me so ! ”

“No, darling, far be it from my wish that you should, but there is no occasion to talk about your family affairs; it is never done in good society.”

“Then society is a horrid thing, if it won’t hear about my poor grand-dad. I could talk of him for ever.”

“Never mind, dear; you will learn to understand it all better soon; and the first thing we must really talk seriously about now is—clothes.”

Mrs. Fitzalan was mistaken if she thought Cicely, like most young girls, would respond at once to this change of subject and forget her troubles in her toilettes. She was too unsophisticated, too uninitiated, to recognize the value from a worldly point of view of appropriate garments; and as for personal vanity, her looking-glass as yet had failed to teach it.

"Oh, I have some neat black dresses," she answered; "and as I must wear them for ever so long, why, there is nothing to be done."

"You cannot go out with me unless you are dressed as a lady—not as a country lass," answered Mrs. Fitzalan, somewhat tartly. "You must allow me to be a fitter judge than yourself of what you ought to wear. White, I think, would suit your age best."

"Grand-dad neither to be talked of nor mourned for!" cried Cicely, piteously. But there was no time for a reply: Mrs. and the Misses Bertrand were announced; and Cicely, at a sign from Mrs. Fitzalan, passed into an inner room through one of those almost invisible partition-doors in which French houses abound.

CHAPTER XI.

CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAVES.

IF Mrs. Bertrand had paid a somewhat unexpected visit to Mrs. Fitzalan with the intention of unearthing the rustic beauty who gossip said was about to become a member of the fashionable widow's household, she had been balked in her intention, and now nearly six weeks had passed away and still she had not seen Cicely. In the mean time that young lady was being equipped for conquest and instructed in the manners and habits of the *grand monde* by the few privileged individuals who were Mrs. Fitzalan's familiars. And Cicely was no inapt scholar; she took her cues sharply, and caught the spirit of a conversation as few neophytes save herself would have succeeded in doing. At last, however, the time of probation is to end, and at a great ball at the Palais de l'Elysée Mrs. Fitzalan's adopted daughter is to make her *début*.

"Well, this is a change from Swinton woods. And to think that poor dear grand-dad has not been dead three months!" she had whispered to Harry Durant as he whirled her round in the circling mazes of a waltz; for Cicely, like most young things, had an instinctive knowledge of dancing.

"Yes, I wonder what Burke would say if he saw us now," said Mr. Durant, laughing.

"That it would be far better to be gathering forget-me-nots and drying them between the pages of some dusty book. I wonder if Mr. Burke ever saw such a scene as this in his life?"

"Do you enjoy it, Cis?" asked her companion as he looked at the girl's happy, beaming face.

"With all my heart. I can't think how I ever lived that other life."

"The wiseacres are right when they say retrogression is impossible—the currents rush ever on, not back."

"Please, Mr. Durant, don't get learned, or I shall have to remind you that tides have a horrid habit of turning; and mine may, long before I want it to, so don't let us think about it—I should like to be perfectly happy to-night."

"Only say what will conduce to your thorough enjoyment, and that thing you shall have, if I can procure it," said Mr. Durant, earnestly. "Troubles to be got rid of—pleasures to be sought for—I am to know all about them: that is our compact, I believe."

"Oh, I shall do very well as I am, thank you; I don't want anything more than I have got at this particular moment."

"'Drink your chalice of champagne with the foam on.
Grasp the glory of your life ere it die.'

That is my motto," cried Harry Durant, gaily; "and if I mistake not you mean it to be yours. *À la bonne heure!*"

And once more they dashed into the rapid dance, nor stopped till they found themselves breathless in close proximity to Mrs. Bertrand. Behind her stood Rose and May. They had for the moment no partners; and the careful match-making mamma, who had especially charged May, if she ever wished to come out again, not to dance with Algy Duncombe, looked on the panting couple with a deep frown and an intense expression of disgust, which would have amused Mr. Durant if he had not feared the injuries his "dear aunt" might inflict on Cicely in the future.

"Ah, I suppose you have only just come? Have a dance, Rose. Shall I find you here when I have taken this young lady back to her chaperone?"

As with the first autumn frost a blight fell on Cicely's heart. "Was she to be put on one side and taken back to her chaperone the moment the young ladies from the Hall appeared? And they had not spoken to or noticed her at all, though as children they had played together every day."

Truth to say, in her new character they did not recognize her, although their mother's severer eye had discovered her at once. But Mr. Durant did not intend this state of things to exist long; in his own mind he had decided upon making May and Rose partisans for Cicely.

So he said, in his offhand way, ignoring all class distinctions, "Why, you girls don't mean to say you don't know each other! Rose, this is Cicely—Miss Fitzalan."

With gushing effusiveness they both seized her by the hand.

"Why, Cis, how could we know you, so changed and handsome as you have become? What a lovely dress! and such flowers! Isn't it nice to see you again! Though you have quite cut us out now, you naughty puss." The exclamations flowed rapidly and in chorus, but were speedily checked by Mrs. Bertrand's recommendation to her doves

to keep their cooing over their old playmate for some more fitting occasion. Cicely did not speak, and, save for a hand-pressure, did not respond to the young ladies' advances; but, with heightened colour and large flashing eyes, stood there superb in her beauty, as though defying Mrs. Bertrand to tilt with her for place. The "insolence of ignorance" Mrs. Bertrand mentally designated her attitude, while Harry Durant gloried secretly over the *amour propre* which would help the girl along and prevent her from being trampled on in the difficult rôle which had been ascribed to her in life.

"Take me back to Mrs. Fitzalan, if you please," she had said, softly, but more as a command than a request; and as they moved off Cicely felt that the first ruffle had arisen on the waters of that pleasant lake about which she had been sailing of late, and that it would not be always so easy as she had imagined to speak out her thoughts to this man, who had elected himself her confidant and adviser.

Mrs. Fitzalan was sitting in a pretty bower in familiar conversation with Sir Hubert Fleming when they joined her. Sir Hubert rose and gave his seat to Cicely.

"Absurd!" cried Mrs. Fitzalan; "this cannot be allowed. A young lady to sit down on the evening of her first ball. The thing is unheard of. What are you thinking of, Sir Hubert?"

"Oh, I have several names on my card. Look, dear Mrs. Fitzalan. But I don't know any of these people yet—only Sir Hubert and Mr. Durant," burst out Cicely, excitedly.

"Allow me, Miss Cicely, to offer you an arm. We will at all events take a stroll, since Mrs. Fitzalan objects to your sitting down."

"Nonsense, Sir Hubert; dance with her yourself," was the widow's whispered remark as they passed her, and to the intense astonishment of more than one individual who

witnessed it, Sir Hubert Fleming led Cicely out to the dance.

Algy Duncombe was so carried away by his surprise at the sight of "old Fleming" dancing that he actually got half on to a chair to have a better view over people's heads. "Though, by Jove, the girl is handsome enough to create a revolution," he exclaimed to one of his familiars who stood by. "I'll get introduced forthwith. Brava, Mrs. Fitzalan! there is not much chance of your losing your fashionable *prestige* as long as you bring young beauties like this into the market."

"And May—is she going to cut May out?" asked his companion, with a laugh.

"You shut up on that subject. The old mother won't let me dance with her; so I'll pay her out by flirting with the new beauty. Nothing so likely to bring the old woman to her senses as a little neglect. 'Une femme est comme votre ombre, courez après, elle vous fuit, fuyez-la, elle court après vous.'"

"A good excuse for indulging in a dangerous pleasure," answered his friend. "You will have, too, the excitement of a little rivalry in this instance, for Fleming and Durant are in the field before you."

"Pooh!" And Algy Duncombe spang from the chair, and in the full assurance of his two-and-twenty years started off in quest of beauty, without a fear that he would find it difficult to distance men whom he imagined Cicely could only regard from a paternal point of view. As far as Sir Hubert Fleming was concerned this was in all probability the case; but Harry Durant had already awakened in the girl's heart that indefinable feeling which she could neither understand nor control. It could scarcely, perhaps, be as yet called love, for none of the pain with which real love is fraught had been born of it; only since she had been in Paris she had revelled in the overwhelming pleasure of seeing him daily, and learning from him those lessons on

conventionality and good-breeding which had been all the more quickly inculcated because he was the teacher. To-night the first check had been given to Cicely's happiness, because to-night, for the first time, they had appeared together in that arena of so many heart-conflicts called Society; but as Mr. Durant passed her, though Rose Bertrand was leaning on his arm, he smiled on her and brought back the warmth and gladness to her heart. "Yes, she must get used to it, she supposed. It was all so different to Swinton. She could not expect that so great a gentleman as Mr. Durant would talk to no one but a poor village girl like her."

"Introduce me sharp, old fellow," Algy Duncombe had whispered to her partner; and on having his request complied with Cicely speedily discovered that she had gained a new admirer, who was scarcely as reticent in expressing his sentiments as were her older friends. Strange would it be if this rustic maiden's head were not turned by the utter change in the programme of her life—she must be made of sterner stuff than the rest of her sex were it not so. But Cicely was not vain by nature, she cared little for flattery—touch her heart, and she was won at once, but the theory of merely pleasing her senses was one which she in nowise understood; hence Algy Duncombe's exaggerated rhapsodies, though they amused her and made her laugh, failed utterly to attain the mark he in his excessive self-assurance had hoped and desired. If, however, he was unsuccessful as far as Cicely was personally concerned, he had the gratification of knowing that May Bertrand was nearly in tears, while her mother was furious that the man who aspired to her daughter's favour should dare to bestow even a thought on "that charity brat." In outward appearance all devotion to Cicely, he was watching the Bertrands carefully the while, and was fully repaid by the expression of both the mother's and daughters' faces.

What a complex study is this society world of ours! more puzzling and difficult in its intricacies than the problems of Euclid or the algebraic conundrums of Colenso.

All this Cicely had yet to learn. For the nonce she danced her shoes into holes, wondered why the French girls looked so prim, instead of enjoying themselves as she did; chattered with her partners, looked across the room to see what Harry Durant was about, and—was happy.

"She is a stunner, and it is all nonsense their saying she is only a lodge-keeper's doubtful grand-daughter—very doubtful indeed, I should imagine. Why, she is as *bon ton* as any woman in the room—a good deal more so than most of them," had been Algy Duncombe's strictures on Cicely as he and two or three other men of his set were refreshing themselves at the supper-table in the small hours of the morning, when most of the ladies had already departed.

"Durant has something to do with her," observed one of the party; "and Mrs. Bertrand knows it, for she looks deuced sour."

"Not she, or she would let it out—women always do," was Algy's answer. "I don't think so. Besides, Durant is one of those good Samaritan sort of fellows who is always willing to help a maiden in distress."

A laughing chorus answered this remark.

"Since when have you learnt to believe?" asked a cynical-looking man of the party. "Is it Cicely or May who has converted you?"

"What the devil have they got to do with it? We were talking of Durant, not of the girls." For Algy, under the influence of champagne, was testy.

"Come, come, old fellow, don't be cross. You have made more way than any of us to-night, and can afford to endure a little chaff."

"It is a commodity I would rather give than take, though," replied Algy, recovering his good temper. "Here

comes Durant. Well, old fellow, the new beauty will do. You have had a hand in her introduction, I believe."

"Well, yes, I am interested in her. I knew her father."

"Knew her father! Why, by all accounts he was a clod."

Harry Durant gave a peculiar smile, which, from its cynicism and assumption of secret knowledge, was, to say the least, very irritating, but he vouchsafed no farther information.

"Come, Durant, tell us all about her. To launch a new beauty and withhold her history is too tantalizing," said one of the men.

"My dear fellow, there is nothing to tell. She is a simple little village girl, who has derived all her instruction from honest old Burke, the vicar of Swinton, down where my people come from, you know. I must refer you to Burke if you require any farther details as to the mode in which she acquired her A B C."

"Oh, well, if you won't tell you won't; but that you can't we will none of us believe. You and Mrs. Fitzalan have got some devil's plot between you: there is no doubting that fact."

A deeply-furrowed frown contracted Mr. Durant's usually open brow.

"I must request that this subject is not alluded to again in my presence," he said, haughtily. "The man who has the good luck to marry Miss Cicely Fitzalan will doubtless be made acquainted with all her antecedents. To any one else it can only be a matter of idle curiosity."

"Better marry her yourself and keep the secret," shouted one of the men, all of whom had drunk more or less freely of their host's champagne; and had not Durant had the tact and good sense to walk away, the banter and questions about Cicely might have passed the limit of his endurance, and a disagreeable skirmish have ended an evening which had otherwise been pleasant and genial.

As it was, the remarks circulated were free and outspoken. Mrs. Fitzalan was more openly discussed than usual. She had brought down an amount of observation by her adoption of Cicely which it was far from her to have courted, if for some reason she had not been forced into the position by that unaccountable but imperial sway which Harry Durant obviously held over her actions. Scrupulously reserved and careful in all she did, it was scarcely in Mrs. Fitzalan's plan of life to have brought Cicely to share her triumphs, and perhaps contribute to her failures, if she had not been forced into it by circumstances over which she had no control; and nothing made her regret these circumstances more bitterly than the knowledge that conversations of the description to-night's *début* had evoked must necessarily follow her appearance with Cicely in her train. Yet she had accepted the responsibility, and as far as poor human strength allowed her she would strive to do her duty. Besides, was not Harry Durant's keen eye ever keeping watchful surveillance?

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE RINK.

"So on the whole your *début* was rather a success last night, child," said Mrs. Fitzalan, when she and Cicely were sitting alone on the day following the first ball.

"Are you glad or sorry?" asked the girl, naïvely.

"Glad, of course. I have an immense objection to anything I undertake proving unsuccessful."

"Is that your only reason? I had hoped you were glad for me." And Cicely gave a pretty little pout, which was one of her newly-acquired accomplishments. "I hoped you loved me just a little bit."

"So I do, so I do—what makes you think the contrary? I should scarcely surround you with luxury if I did not care for you."

"Yet you could not have liked me before you saw me," suggested Cicely, pointedly. "I wonder why you sent for me?"

"Because I was the appointed agent to assist in carrying out the destiny elected for you before you were even born," said Mrs. Fitzalan, with a forced laugh.

"No, Mrs. Fitzalan, you don't believe it, do you? You don't believe that I must do certain things, go to certain places, whether I wish or not?"

Mrs. Fitzalan nodded her head.

"We are only free agents in a very limited degree, I think," she said, calmly. "At least I should not be here now if I had not been dragged on by a train of circumstances I failed to stem; and each day I act as I am told or forced. I believe we all do the same—some more, some less."

"But can we not resist temptation? Mr. Burke says we can."

"Mr. Burke! Shut up in that dreary village, what does he know about fate and the way people are compelled to do things they would otherwise avoid by a power no mortal can withstand? Mr. Burke! Don't talk to me of Mr. Burke." And there was a harsh, discordant jar in Mrs. Fitzalan's tones which grated sensibly on Cicely as she listened.

"What could this world be like into which she had plunged, and what terrible things was she to be made to do? Yet it all seemed pleasant enough at the outset, and as far as she could see Mrs. Fitzalan had not much to complain of."

"Fate has been kind to me in bringing me to you," she said gaily, after a moment's pause. "In future I will trust myself to her guidance."

"You will not always find her a lenient mistress. She makes her children pass through many stern vicissitudes," replied the elder lady.

"As long as she gives me plenty of roses I shall not mind a few thorns." And Cicely laughed merrily.

"So I thought once; but there are some roses so guarded by their thorns you cannot touch them without pain, and they are generally those one longs for the most."

"True." And Cicely hung her head on one side and traced a pattern with the point of her toe on the floor, as though she were meditating seriously on the subject of roses and their thorns—a prick or cut from the latter having already made her flinch. Was she thinking of that valse with Harry Durant which had been quite spoiled by the appearance of his young-lady cousins? Perhaps!

Mrs. Fitzalan smiled as she watched her.

"You must not begin to think already," she said. "Ten years hence will be soon enough for that. You are going to trust to fate, you say, so it is no use making a map of life for yourself. The band is to play at the new rink this afternoon; would you like to go?"

"Yes, so much!" And Cicely sprang to her feet; then, suddenly dropping back into her seat, "I don't know," she said, soberly. "I once heard Mr. Durant say he would rather see a girl in her grave than skating at a rink."

"What nonsense! Besides, you need not skate."

"But do you think Mr. Durant would like me to go?"

"Pray is Mr. Durant your oracle, that you can only do what he elects? I thought you were my charge, not his." And such a wrathful expression as Cicely had not seen there before spread itself over Mrs. Fitzalan's features as she spoke testily.

"Of course, dear Mrs. Fitzalan, I will always do what you wish; but I thought, as he was a friend of yours, I might tell you he does not approve of rinks."

"Friend or no friend, I do not consider myself amenable

to his authority, either as regards myself or you. We will go to the rink this afternoon." And Mrs. Fitzalan spoke very positively and seemed really angry.

In her heart she hated Harry Durant—hated him with fierce, undying hatred such as could only have had for its progenitor a great love—perchance trampled on and despised in the far-off past which each believes the other to have well-nigh forgotten. Mixed with this hatred was a fear and a dread which made her quail like a coward in his presence, obey as by some mesmeric power the bidding of his eye. It was only when he was absent that she felt free to speak and act, or would have dared to contradict any caprice of his, however fanciful—as she had done to Cicely but now.

Cicely had looked at her in some alarm when she spoke so decidedly. This was a new phase in the widow's nature which the girl had not yet beheld, and she could not understand any one contradicting Mr. Durant, in whose hands she herself was thoroughly plastic. There was nothing to be done, however, but to obey Mrs. Fitzalan and trust to fate to put things straight if Mr. Durant should be displeased. Already the girl had thrown herself into the rapid current of circumstances and was preparing to accept what she was pleased to deem the inevitable, without making any effort to assert her own free will.

"I cannot help it." How many lives are marred by the want of moral courage to try and "help" dashing against the rock which stands prominently in the way!

Mrs. Fitzalan did not really care to go to the rink; it bored her, as did to all appearance every social gathering; but to take Cicely there was to a certain degree a contravention of Harry Durant's wishes, and that thought, if no other, gave a zest to the amusement. So they muffled themselves up in their furs—for the day was sharp and wintry—and drove to the scene of the new exercise in which fashion's votaries have of late learnt so freely to display their graces and—their feet. From her childhood

Cicely had skated on the pond at Swinton with Rose and May Bertrand ; that is to say, when she was not sliding in the village with the less aristocratic side of her acquaintance ; and how she longed to tour it on castors round the wide expanse of asphalte none but a girl still in her teens can thoroughly guess. But there was Harry Durant's image in the way ; what would he say or think, and would he ever speak to her again ? Algy Duncombe was escorting May on a most flirtatious circuit of the grounds, for Mrs. Bertrand, owing to a bad headache, had, quite contrary to her usual practice, allowed the two girls to go to the rink with their father ; and good benevolent soul, he never saw a flirtation even when it was blossoming in his own garden, but always allowed people to make themselves happy in their own way without any counter-interference of his. He had patted Cicely kindly on the shoulder and wished her every luck and success in life, and then stood talking in his pleasant way to Mrs. Fitzalan. He had heard her pretty freely discussed by the ladies of his household, and perhaps he was glad of an opportunity of measuring the widow from his own standard ; for notwithstanding Mrs. Bertrand's disparaging remark on his want of sight and ken, the squire was no fool, but very capable of taking an accurate estimate of a character, and furthermore possessed the valuable adjunct of knowing how to hold his tongue about the opinion he had formed—always concealing it by assuming the same urbane, placid manner equally to those he deemed worthy or unworthy of his good opinion.

“Not rinking, Cis !” he had said, turning once more to the girl in the middle of his conversation with her chaperone. “Why, you look as demure as a pussy sitting on a hearth-rug. Since when has this change come over you ?”

“I don't know how to rink, and I am rather tired after my ball—it was my first, you know.”

"Tired at seventeen! a lass like you, too, who used to run wild all over the woods! I can't believe it. Come, don't be shy, little one; it is no use now you are once launched."

"Mr. Bertrand is quite right; you ought to rink—it looks prudish and absurd." And there were the same acid tones in Mrs. Fitzalan's voice which Cicely had heard in the morning.

"But I don't know how," was all she ventured to expostulate, timidly.

Sir Hubert Fleming—by some freak of chance he was the cavalier who was always ready in an emergency—offered his assistance as an instructor, his strong arm by way of support, for though he did not rink himself he understood the art in theory. It was little teaching, though, that Cicely wanted. Light in frame and used from her babyhood to every sort of out-door exercise, she was soon thoroughly at home on her wheels, and went round and round with a zest and pleasure which was only marred by the recollection which would obtrude itself that her one friend, Mr. Durant, would disapprove most thoroughly if he saw her. It never entered Cicely's head to keep the knowledge from him of how she had indulged in this forbidden amusement; she would tell him all about it the very first moment she saw him, that she was quite resolved; and surely he would not be so very angry with her when he heard it was not altogether her fault. Ah! there he was, talking to Rose Bertrand, who had taken off her skates and was waiting about until her sister had finished her flirtation with Algy Duncombe. Well, this was too bad, to be sure. No, fate was not kind. Rose had skated quite as much as Cicely, and of course Mr. Durant would think she had been playing the proper young lady all the afternoon.

"I am quite tired. Please let me have these horrid things taken off," she said, pettishly, to Sir Hubert. "It is not half so nice as real ice."

"Why, just now you thought it charming. Surely you are not learning to be capricious, like the rest?" said the baronet somewhat seriously. Cicely's innocent freshness had impressed him as it shone, bright and untarnished, beside the artificial *blasées* women in which society abounds, and he would not have the dew dashed from the delicate petals of her life for all the world.

"I am not capricious, but I have had enough. I said from the first I did not want to rink—you know that is quite true, Sir Hubert."

"Nor shall you be forced to do anything you don't like, if I can help it. Sit down and let me unshoe you."

It was a labour of love, for Sir Hubert liked the office, though he performed it awkwardly. He could scarcely be called a ladies' man, though he was always finding excuses for the tender sex, in spite of bitter injuries inflicted on him in the past. Instead of growing hard and cold, he somehow always imagined that any evil or mischief perpetrated by others was more or less his fault; and, notwithstanding his outward appearance of grave melancholy, there beat in his bosom as big and warm and tender a heart as man ever yet possessed; only, unluckily, women had hitherto failed to appreciate Sir Hubert as he merited, nor looked beyond his baronetcy and banker's book for those noble attributes which were latent in the man. Beside Harry Durant he would have no chance. The one—shy, retiring, commonplace in appearance, and almost plain in features—was thoroughly eclipsed by the other's buoyancy, manly beauty, and that overwhelming amount of life with which he was so thoroughly instinct. Cicely, although she scarcely as yet knew the state of her own feelings, was becoming each day more and more engrossed in her thoughts about Harry Durant; while on Sir Hubert she only bestowed such an amount of passing civility as was due from her to any friend of Mrs. Fitzalan's. And that Sir Hubert was a friend of Mrs. Fitzalan's there

seemed little doubt, though the reserved and guarded widow had never been known to warm into a demonstration of feeling for any member of the opposite sex, or in any way to allow her character for excessive propriety to be in the very least degree compromised.

On the present occasion Cicely almost hated Sir Hubert as he led her back to her seat and still continued to hover about her. In the distance she saw Rose Bertrand leaning against the pillar which supported a portico, in pleasant and familiar conversation with Harry Durant, for they were both laughing as though they had no care or thought in life. Yes, the thorns were about the roses—there was no mistaking the matter—and the pricks they were inflicting were the first serious ones Cicely had ever felt. “Was it a mere chance and for idleness that he was lingering there, or was he gravely displeased with her for putting on those horrid skates when he had expressed himself so warmly on the subject?” With childlike impetuosity she would fain have sped across to where he stood and begged him to hear her excuses and forgive her, but the womanhood which had lately dawned upon her asserted itself with an effort and reminded her that such conduct would be neither decorous nor modest, so she bit her lips with annoyance till the crimson blood came, and learnt her first lesson in endurance. On Mrs. Fitzalan’s countenance there was a smile. Did she note the girl’s discomfiture and enjoy it? It were hard to say, for she gave no other sign; yet it was scarcely possible that Mr. Durant’s presence had been unperceived by her, and that the rest of the little comedy had escaped her vigilant notice. At last every one was on the move; even Algy and May had been compelled to bring their infrequent pleasure to an end; but Harry Durant still talked animatedly to Rose. It would have cured Mrs. Bertrand’s *migraine* to a certainty if she could have seen them. To leave the rink Mrs. Fitzalan and Cicely must pass that way.

"Well, Cis, I hope you have enjoyed your first attempt at rinking," was Rose's remark, when they were close to her.

"Oh, I only just tried, and I think it is horrid; but then I am not such an adept as you are."

Who shall say, after this retort, that Cicely, though of village antecedents, was not qualified to take her place in the world's whirl?

Harry Durant frowned.

"It is neither graceful nor edifying, and is an excessively dangerous amusement. I hope you have had enough to prevent you from trying again," he said, rather severely. But Mrs. Fitzalan gave Cicely no time to answer.

"Oh, please, don't put that into Cicely's head, Mr. Durant. She must have exercise, and I have not strength to walk with her."

"Girls had plenty of exercise before rinking was invented," he answered. "I am somewhat of a stickler for old practices. You will never persuade me into approving of this new pastime." And he raised his hat very formally, in true continental fashion, as Mrs. Fitzalan passed him without deigning to give any promise whether Cicely should or should not pursue an exercise which, for some reason of his own, was obviously very distasteful to him. Of Cicely herself he took no notice; and vainly, as she followed Mrs. Fitzalan, did she look for the smiling token of good fellowship which Mr. Durant was wont to bestow on her. Nor did Rose's laughing remark, "Dear me, cousin Harry, that is quite a new idea to think it is wrong to rink: I shall have to tell mamma how particular you have become," do otherwise than give her another of those horrid thornpricks from which she had been smarting the whole afternoon.

CHAPTER XIII.

GALL AND WORMWOOD.

MRS. FITZALAN stands, with arched eyebrows and distended nostrils, open-mouthed, as though gasping from an anger that can find no words, while her eyes are starting prominently from her head. The *grisaille* tint of her life is obviously changing in tone, to be replaced by the stronger colouring of the sensational school. She does not speak—perhaps she can scarcely trust herself to give utterance to her feelings—but, clutching with nervous energy the back of a chair, she remains motionless, glaring at Sir Hubert Fleming, who is her only companion, till the poor man almost fears temporary aberration of intellect on the part of the usually placid widow.

“They have dared to raise this scandal about me, and you have dared to bring me the report. I thank you, Sir Hubert, for your courage and your kind thought,” she said at last, with a sort of hysterical scorn.

“Really, Mrs. Fitzalan, I am sorry, very sorry I mentioned the subject.” And his looks verified the statement.

She gave him her hand.

“You have always been my friend—be so still. Have I not thanked you for the interest displayed? You could scarcely expect me to hear such intelligence without a quiver. My God! what will not people say, what characters will they not defame, simply for the sake of giving their tongues a little relaxation! My child!—so Cicely is my child, forsooth!—a brat whom I have taken out of mere charity, to please Harry Durant.”

Sir Hubert looked up astonished. This was the first time he had heard anything so near the truth. Save under

the influence of a strong excitement Mrs. Fitzalan would not have owned even to Sir Hubert the power Harr Durant had over her.

"Then you do not know aught of her parentage?" he said, quietly.

She scanned him for a second attentively. Then, once more on her guard, her answer was an evasive one.

"What should I care about her antecedents? She only came, at Mr. Durant's suggestion, to help wile away my dull hours; and I wish she was back in England with a my heart."

"Then you do not care for her?"

"Oh, I like the child well enough; only I could easily have foregone all the gossip her coming has occasioned."

"Will you give her to me?"

"What! Give Cicely to you? Sir Hubert, are you mad?"

"Only mad as most men are when they are smitten with a strong and sudden fancy," he answered, smiling. "I see you look incredulous, my friend; but I should like Cicely for my wife. *She*, I feel, would scarcely prove otherwise than true and faithful."

Mrs. Fitzalan did not reply at once, but sat down near him and stared at him with an odd, almost vacant expression on her face; then suddenly an inspiration seemed to come to her, and she smiled.

"This is a greater position than one could have hoped for little Cicely," she said. "And you really mean seriously that you wish to rob me of my *protégée*?"

"Yes, if she loves me, Mrs. Fitzalan; and I will not even ask this mysterious secret about her birth."

"Just so—just so. You are very good and kind. Of course if it were my secret I would tell you at once. As for loving you, it will be strange, Sir Hubert, if the little puss can help it."

The baronet looked pleased at the implied compliment

but it was only for a moment; then he said, very seriously—

“Since you can keep a secret so religiously, Mrs. Fitzalan, will you be the faithful guardian of mine, and promise me that to no one, not even to Cicely herself, will you reveal it until I give you leave?”

“I promise you,” she said at once. “Not even to Mr. Durant will I tell it.”

“To him least of all. I must be sure that the child cares for me before I commit myself in this matter. Only you will watch my interests yourself, dear Mrs. Fitzalan, will you not?”

“Most assuredly. You may trust me implicitly, although I am not Cicely’s mother, as the world, or rather Mrs. Bertrand, would have you to believe.”

“I am sorry I induced you to be introduced to that woman, for I fear the acquaintance has scarcely yielded much pleasure.”

“Oh, it matters but little, Sir Hubert. When the Paris season is over our parted lives are not likely to be joined again.”

“That is a theory I scarcely believe in,” he said, laughing. “Disagreeable people are never lost; the utmost that happens is that they are sometimes mislaid for a time.”

“I am glad to find you are brave enough to acknowledge Mrs. Bertrand to be a disagreeable person. People with her proclivities generally make themselves too much feared to be judged honestly. Oh! she has a vile slanderous tongue.”

“As I regret having been compelled to prove to you,” replied Sir Hubert, earnestly, “for I fear your peace of mind has been destroyed, for some days at least, by Mrs. Bertrand’s wild talk.”

“Oh no. The impression will pass. One cannot go on worrying over what is false; though I must say this

scandal unhinged me for a moment. But a known enemy is more than half-conquered, they say; and, thanks to you, I am *en pays de connaissance*. You will not desert me now—you will tell me *all* you hear? We are to be allies, you know."

"Just so, my dear lady; only is not that very much like returning evil for good, if I am to bring you malicious reports in return for your good offices with Cicely?"

"No, no, no," she said, hurriedly; "it is imperative that I should know the whole truth. The false statement that I am Cicely's mother is nothing in comparison with the calumnies Mrs. Bertrand might—that is, is capable of asserting."

"Strange that she should have singled you out as her butt."

"Some minds from sheer crookedness select for malicious libel those who have never injured them. To Mrs. Bertrand spite is sport. God knows, whatever sins I have committed, none of them lie unavenged at her door. But you will help me and protect me, will you, Sir Hubert, if difficulties and miseries should arise? For I feel, I know not why, as if a great act in the drama of my life were about to be played out."

"My dear Mrs. Fitzalan, pray do not excite yourself thus." And he looked terribly nervous and preoccupied, for never could he remember to have seen her thus moved. "Of course I will do anything, everything for you. Send for me at any hour—under any circumstances."

"Thank you, Sir Hubert, thank you; and once more remember I must have the whole truth—always. And now I must ask you to leave me, in order that I may compose myself before Cicely, who has gone out shopping with my maid, shall return."

For some seconds after his departure she did not stir; but the tremulousness of her emotion passed away, to be succeeded by a look of hatred so deep, bitter, and fierce as

to threaten an assault more telling than mere words against the individual who was the victim of her wrath. Slowly, surely, and effectively would Mrs. Fitzalan's blows in all probability be dealt, for hers was not a character that indulged in the empty parade of anger. She would not act till she had thought out the details and eventually arranged the fitting moment, and then with decision and strength would the blow fall.

"Merely a woman's tongue." Surely to one of Mrs. Fitzalan's calibre animosity such as she seemed about to evince would scarcely be aroused by so slight a ripple; there must be a deep under-current which she alone could see below the surface of Mrs. Bertrand's babbling word-stream.

She rose at last from the sitting posture in which she had remained since Sir Hubert left her, and, going to the *escritoire* where her private papers were kept, took a small portrait from a secret drawer. Years ago it must have been taken, in the heyday of youth and developing manhood, yet the features and eyes were the same, and even those who knew him but little could scarcely fail to recognize the cheery countenance of Harry Durant. Withering contempt and scorn was Mrs. Fitzalan's expression as she looked at it; yet she had kept it carefully hidden from the public gaze, and had never travelled, however far from home, without taking it with her as a companion. Now, after just one second of hesitation, she smashed with her doubled fist the glass which covered it, and, unheeding how she had cut her hand with the fragments, tore into a thousand pieces the coloured miniature, laughing hysterically as she threw them on the wood-fire and watched the flames destroy them.

"Let the sentiment which was the spirit of the dead past perish with those scraps," she said, in a solemn undertone. "And now, Harry Durant, it shall be war to the knife between us. You have chosen the weapons, and you will find I am not incapable of wielding them."

Then there was a long pause, during which she lay passively back in an arm-chair, while the drops of blood from the glass-cuts trickled unnoticed on to the delicate handkerchief in her lap.

"Who can say there is no fate?" she went on after a while, muttering to herself, "I, who would not have harmed a hair of his head, who would have given my life for his without a murmur, into what has he driven me now? 'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned.' He has slighted me, condemned me with contemptuous sneers, till he has turned all the milk of human kindness in my nature into gall, my love for him into a deep and bitter hatred. Oh, God! the past years have been long, but still they ran. Why has he come again to cross my life and mar the last days, on which the sun of righteousness might perchance have set before rest came? Now peace has departed for ever. He or fate—and is not Harry Durant my fate?—has willed it so, and I am powerless to withstand the storm."

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan—dear Mrs. Fitzalan, your hand is bleeding. What has happened to it? Do let me bind it for you." It was Cicely's voice; she had entered unobserved by Mrs. Fitzalan, engrossed as she was in her almost dream-like soliloquy.

"It is nothing, child, nothing. You should never be obtrusive with unasked attention—it is bad style."

The tears started into Cicely's eyes, as much at the asperity of tone with which she was addressed as at the harshness of the reproof. Mrs. Fitzalan recollected herself, however, and bade the girl not mind her—she was irritable and tired—but to call Victorine, and tell her to bring water and bathe her hand.

The slight wounds were but of little import, but they served to form a topic for chatter and regret, during which Mrs. Fitzalan recovered from the fierce excitement under which she had been labouring for the last hour.

The maid was gone, and tranquillity had been restored once more, when an unguarded word from Cicely, who was kneeling in front of the fire, awakened the dormant war-spirit.

"I met Mr. Durant at the door; he was coming here, but he went with me instead and chose all my dresses for me. He told me to tell you he had taken good care of me."

Mrs. Fitzalan grew pale as death, but she did not speak.

"Does your hand hurt you, dear? You look quite faint," the girl asked, tenderly.

"Yes, a little; but never mind—go on. What was it you were saying? Oh, about Mr. Durant. Never mind him; he is nobody. What dresses did you get?"

But it was Cicely's turn not to answer at once. She looked musingly into the fire, her thoughts evidently very far from dresses. Then she said—

"I can't think why you don't like Mr. Durant; but I am sure you do not."

Mrs. Fitzalan gave a little forced laugh.

"Mr. Durant is perfectly indifferent to me,—it were as well, perhaps, that he were equally so to you. You will not like him, perhaps, quite so much when he has married his cousin, Miss Rose Bertrand; then, perhaps, you will despise him as much as——"

Cicely's changeful colour told its own tale of how these pointed words had hit the mark for which they were intended; but her native woman's pluck asserted itself, and she said, with ever such a little quiver in her tone—

"Oh yes—of course—he is going to marry Miss Rose. It has been arranged for years, has it not?"

"I don't know anything about years, but money goes out of the family if he does not marry her; so Mrs. Bertrand has very wisely resolved to secure it by this marriage."

"He has been very kind to me," almost murmured Cicely.

"I dare say; but you will have to look out for yourself when Madame Rose is promoted. No Bertrand was ever kind to any one."

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, the squire is so good!"

"I forgot him—he is a nonentity." And Mrs. Fitzalan laughed. "Mrs. Bertrand is perforce the squire."

But Cicely's little fight was over. She laid her head on a footstool that was near her, and lay limp and silent in front of the fire. Mrs. Fitzalan sat in her arm-chair and watched her. In her heart she felt sorry for the girl; for though she had come into her house as a forced inmate, yet she rather liked her, and would have helped rather than injured her in all matters in which Harry Durant was unconcerned; but she had vowed a deep and bitter hatred against him for his threats and his contempt; and were her regard for Cicely ten times what it was, it must give place when it interfered with the plan of action she intended to carry out against him.

"Get up, little one, and dress. We have two parties to do to-night, and it is getting near dinner-time."

"Oh, what a bore going out is!" said Cicely, as she rose languidly to obey.

"Good gracious! *blasée* already! It is time you went back to Swinton village."

"Oh, dear Mrs. Fitzalan, how ungrateful I am!" And she threw her arms round her new friend's neck and kissed her affectionately. "Only I think I am rather tired."

"It will pass, child—it will pass. All women have their phases. Make yourself look pretty to-night—that is a girl's first mission."

"Is it?" asked Cicely, absently. "What is the good, I wonder?"

"That you will learn later. Now go."

And in a few hours the two women upon whose lives so

much gall had been sprinkled that afternoon might be seen with smiling faces entering a crowded *salon*. The unsophisticated village maid had already learnt the first great lesson of feminine life—to hide her feelings.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

MAY BERTRAND is sitting in a small boudoir appropriated by the sisters as their morning room, and her usually pink cheeks are pale and tear-stained. Poor gentle, loving, little May, she has just passed through a somewhat stormy interview with that most terrible of she-dragons, her mother, and she has decidedly come off worsted in the contest. Mrs. Bertrand has for some time imagined that Algy Duncombe's banker's book would scarcely bear her strict investigation, and a conversation she overheard between two men at a reception the previous evening has verified her suspicions; while, as though on purpose to exasperate her to the very fullest degree, not ten minutes later she was congratulated on the flirtation and probable engagement which existed between her daughter and the aforesaid Mr. Algernon Duncombe. On poor May's devoted head were the vials of her mother's wrath out-poured. She could not help Algy loving her, she could not help loving him, unhappy child. What could she do but weep? for to attempt to resist the torrent of reproaches with which she was well-nigh overwhelmed would have taken a far more spirited maiden than May, who was her father's child, calm and easy-going, and had not even as much power of self-assertion as Rose, who had inherited a tiny bit of the maternal temper. Mrs. Bertrand had just

left her, and May was alone, chewing the cud of despair and annoyance, when the door suddenly opened to admit Harry Durant. As a true knight of chivalric renown he could scarcely see a damsel in distress unmoved. He seated himself at once beside his little cousin, and soon succeeded in winning from her the guileless story of her love. Here was a powerful champion and advocate indeed, if cousin Harry would only help her; but cousin Harry did not reciprocate as warmly as she could wish. Truth to tell, in his heart he did not feel very sure either of Master Algy or his prospects. Vague reports as to the doubtful solvency of the elder Duncombe had reached him; and Mr. Durant was too well acquainted with his dear aunt's proclivities to imagine that any amount of pressure would induce her to allow one of her daughters to marry any man who could not show the positive existence of hard cash or broad acres. Harry Durant had, however, been to a certain degree touched by May's woebegone countenance, and readily promised to do the utmost in his power, meaning that he would investigate Master Algy's monetary position before he had any conversation with his aunt on the subject, even if the inquiry, to be a complete one, should necessitate a journey to London and an interview with paterfamilias. Receiving these assurances from cousin Harry, May's pretty face brightened. There was something in his strong will and cheerful view of life in which all women believed; therefore how could May doubt that with him for an ally the colouring of the future must be restored to a roseate hue?

"It is sure to be all right if cousin Harry has undertaken to arrange matters," she said to Rose, when the two sisters were talking confidentially a few hours later. "Only we are not to say anything to mamma till he gives us leave."

"Cousin Harry turned match-maker! Why, this is quite a new phase," cried Rose, laughing. "We shall have him becoming a Benedick next."

"There is no knowing what may happen," said May, whose spirits had risen many degrees since the morning. "If you were to marry cousin Harry mamma would be in such a good temper! She would think Algy an angel——"

"Don't trust to broken reeds, my dear May. If cousin Harry foregoes celibacy, it will be because Cicely's bright eyes have won him."

"Cicely, the village girl! Oh, Rose, you must be mad. He only patronizes her."

"I am not mad, and I am not mistaken. Without being in love with cousin Harry, I am interested enough in him to be quite sure that the bias of his mind turns towards Cicely."

"Oh, then he is no use at all as an ally; for if he married Cicely mamma would cut him for ever. But I can't believe it; it is Mrs. Fitzalan he admires."

"Pooh! she hates him. I have seen her look at him with those keen eyes of hers when she thought no one was watching."

"Why, Rose, you have become quite an observer! I never see any of these things."

"Because you never look at any one but Algy Duncombe; while I—well, I tell you, I am interested in cousin Harry, and excessively *intriguée* to discover all about Cicely and Mrs. Fitzalan. I am sure she knows something about us—she always seems uncomfortable and forced in her manner with mamma."

"Ask cousin Harry; he'll tell you."

"May, what a little fool you are! That would be just the way not to find out."

"Would it? Well, I don't understand anything about these entanglements, and I don't much care."

From which fragment of conversation it may be inferred that Rose considered herself to be endowed with a superior mind, and to be a young person to whom the gentler and more malleable May might look up with trustfulness.

She had chosen just the happy word when she had expressed an "interest" in her cousin—an interest which might have ripened into an attachment was exactly the sentiment he had awakened; only he never attempted to cultivate the incipient feeling into a warmer one, and Rose had been brought up in too good a school not to be able readily to calculate men's behaviour at the exact sum for which it was worth. Without the slightest intellectual cleverness, that sort of surface-shrewdness which stands so many women in good stead had grown up with her from her early "teens," and given her that degree of superiority which she vaunted over her less knowing but more lovable sister. Hence, perhaps, the companionship she at times afforded Mr. Durant, who was a little bit amused by Rose, though both his cousins failed utterly to awaken the tender regard for which Mrs. Bertrand so longingly sought, and sought in vain.

With May's simple love tale fresh in his mind, he wandered down the Champs Elysées till he reached the abode which the fates had selected for Cicely's home.

Mrs. Fitzalan had gone out, and gentlemen visitors were conventionally refused admittance; but Mr. Durant was a sort of guardian; and Victorine, who had been left in charge, opened the door to him at once, remarking, with much incaution—

"*Ah, c'est vous, monsieur, entrez toujours*; though madame say—only Sir Hubert."

"Oh, the *consigne* is always raised for me," he answered, laughing; though what the deuce Sir Hubert had to do with Cicely was an inquiry he made *sotto voce* of himself.

With a little cry of pleasure she started up when she saw him; but it was instantly checked, to be succeeded by a sort of prudish formal manner which Cicely, among her other accomplishments, was learning to assume.

"It is so difficult to be yourself and not show your feelings—so much easier to act a part and think you are

some one else," was the conclusion at which this young girl, but lately a village flower, had, under Mrs. Fitzalan's tutelage, already arrived.

Mr. Durant had scarcely yet remarked the change; at least he had not taken it in its entirety, for he had seen Cicely but twice since Mrs. Fitzalan had dropped those few seemingly careless words which had sunk so deep into the girl's heart; but he noticed the guarded reserve with which she met him now, and said, laughing—

"You are getting such a very grand young lady that we shall be obliged to send you back to Swinton to unlearn your finery. Haven't you got a more friendly reception than that for an old friend?"

"Oh, Mr. Durant, I am very pleased to see you."

"Are you? Well, you seem quite the reverse. Has anything happened to annoy you, child?"

"No, nothing. What should annoy me? Thanks to your kindness, I am in Paradise."

"Indeed! Well, from the look of you I should imagine you don't find it a very pleasant place."

"Not Paradise? Why, it could not be otherwise; or it would not be Paradise."

"Now, Cicely, you are avoiding the subject and talking nonsense. Where has Mrs. Fitzalan gone, and why were you to be at home to Fleming?"

"I don't know. I did not know he was coming." But she answered hesitatingly, and coloured as she spoke.

It was evident from her manner that Mrs. Fitzalan had lost no time in insinuating that Sir Hubert's feelings towards Cicely were more loyal and honourable than were those of Mr. Durant. As for him, he looked at her aghast. It never entered his head to imagine that the sombre Fleming would dream of entering the lists as Cicely's lover; but what he feared most in Mrs. Fitzalan's chaperonage was that she would lead the girl into some imbroglio or other, and he fancied one was brewing now. To crush

it at once was his immediate determination, and in order to effect this Cicely must be subjected to an inquisitorial cross-examination.

He felt excessively irritated and vexed ; but he seated himself beside her and tried to look his pleasant, cheerful self. By coaxing, not intimidation, he would discover, if possible, all Cicely had to tell about Sir Hubert Fleming. But she only looked frightened and said "she did not know what he meant. Sir Hubert was kind, so was everyone—why should he not come there ? "

"Is this ingenuousness or acting ? " he queried of himself. Cicely had always been straightforward and honest with him, but her heightened colour and scared look made him doubt her truth in the present instance. Altogether he was considerably nonplussed, for to put a leading question as to what plot Mrs. Fitzalan was hatching would be to cast an aspersion on the very woman he, for reasons best known to himself, had selected as the girl's guide and friend. All, therefore, that he could do was to look at her with a grave expression as he said—

"The alliance in which I had rejoiced seems likely to come to a speedy disruption, since you have already dismissed me from my position of friend."

"Oh, Mr. Durant, I have never dismissed you. How can you say so ? Only——"

"Only what, Cicely ? There is some mystery behind all this."

"Indeed—indeed, I have done nothing."

"Only what, then ? "

"Only I don't understand the ways of this new world. How should I ? "

"Very unnecessary that you should, my child. Go your own truthful way, and don't attempt to keep pace with mysteries which can never end advantageously. You are here as Mrs. Fitzalan's companion—don't attempt to look farther. Her life has not been moulded as yours has

been, and to seek to inquire into it would be mere curiosity on your part, to attempt to meddle with its workings madness. If you are perplexed at what you see and hear come to me for guidance. Perhaps I was wrong in inducing you to leave Swinton, but God knows I did it for the best."

It was Cicely's turn to look surprised as she answered, striving to laugh—

"You are making things most thoroughly incomprehensible to me. I don't know what any of it means, but I suppose I must try to do as I am bid, and isn't my first duty to Mrs. Fitzalan?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied, somewhat hesitatingly; "that is, if——"

"If what, Mr. Durant?" she asked, with just the least shade of sarcasm in her tone at the tables being turned on him; so that he found it difficult to answer directly. As it happened she was not destined to be gratified, for at that moment Sir Hubert Fleming and Mrs. Fitzalan entered the room together.

Yes, there was the look of hatred in the cold eyes which Rose had not failed to observe, but which Durant never troubled himself to look for, probably because he knew it existed but failed to regard it as a symptom worthy of attention. They met with a cordiality which was on both sides delusive, and Mrs. Fitzalan inquired in bland terms after the Bertrands.

"I have just come from there," was the unguarded reply, "but only saw one of the girls."

Mrs. Fitzalan's next glance was for Cicely, who walked to the window and found objects of interest in the street.

"They are going to England soon, are they not?" she went on, addressing Mr. Durant.

"Yes, I fancy so. We shall all be on the move soon. Paris will be getting hot. And you, Mrs. Fitzalan?"

"Oh, I shall not stir till after Easter, if then. I cannot afford to be long away from home, you know."

"But you will not come to England?"

Had some devil prompted him to ask the question? Perchance. The effect it had on the lady was as if the shock had galvanized her. There was no mistake in the look of hatred now with which she glared at him; though Cicely, and Sir Hubert who had followed her to the window, did not see it.

Mr. Durant held out his hand and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Pardon me," he said, gently; "I had forgotten, or perhaps hoped that you had done so."

"Never!" she hissed out below her breath. "I never forget; happiness—misery—both bear their indelible mark for ever!"

"Were it not well sometimes that the past should be worn out, when it cannot be retrieved?" he asked, hesitatingly.

"Who said it could not be retrieved? Am I not wearing out my life over that work of reparation, and at your bidding? I am not faithless to old memories."

"Nor I, Mrs. Fitzalan; only the memory which stands prominent in my mind bears a more recent date than yours." And there was an angry look in Harry Durant's eyes, a tone of asperity in his voice, which he but rarely exhibited unless deeply moved.

"Enough, Mr. Durant. Discussion is useless. We have both taken our positions in life. It remains to be seen which will hold the situation the longest."

Mr. Durant looked at Cicely, talking equable nothings to Sir Hubert in the window-seat, and held his peace. For her sake he must not rouse the lioness, all untamed, as he felt it might prove, in Mrs. Fitzalan's breast.

"My dear lady, you misjudge me wholly. I am most anxious to be your friend," he said.

But a sneer and a curl of her pale lips was the only answer she vouchsafed as she turned to make some passing

remark to the others ; and, before any one knew exactly how, the conversation drifted into a talk of projected journeys, and Sir Hubert asked if Mr. Durant were going to travel to England with the Bertrands.

"I scarcely know. Family parties, as a rule, are not to my liking ; but I may have to go to England soon, and the same day may accidentally find us *en route* together."

Cicely's heart for a moment felt as if it had ceased to beat ; but she showed no outward sign, and Harry Durant soon after took his leave, wondering to himself as he sauntered down the stairs what pleasure Mrs. Fitzalan could find in the constant companionship of the lugubrious Fleming.

"She will never dare marry him," he murmured to himself ; "and as a mere hanger-on I should think he was of the dullest."

CHAPTER XV

ALONE.

A GIRL half-crouching, half-sitting in an armchair by a window, with blanched cheeks and wide-open distended eyes, which look as if no teardrop could ever come to soften their fevered gaze. Can it be Cicely, but a few short months ago the merriest spirit on the village green ?

A letter which she has torn into a thousand fragments, and thrown perhaps angrily at her feet, may explain the reason of this unusual phase in Cicely's every-day existence. Harry Durant's somewhat illegible writing is on that paper ; but though the first missive Cicely has ever received from him, she has read it and understood it all too easily. "He is about to start for England on business which calls

him off rather suddenly. She is to be a good child during his absence, and on his revisiting France perhaps he will forgive her for the somewhat cavalier way in which she has treated him of late."

How dare he indite such lines to her, was her first cry when she read his letter. With all her heart she hoped he never would come back—she never wished to see or speak to him again. Then she tore the missive into shreds and sat there motionless and passive, as though stunned by the intelligence she had just received. The misunderstanding Mrs. Fitzalan would have given worlds to bring about had sprung up without that lady having given herself much trouble to effect it. Harry Durant believed Cicely to be ungrateful for his kindness, perhaps unworthy of his growing attachment for her, while she longed only to escape from his very sight, for was he not to be ere long Rose Bertrand's husband?

"Alas! how light a cause may move
Dissension between hearts that love!"

A few careless words spoken by Mrs. Fitzalan, seemingly without an aim, had raised the first cloudlet on the bright horizon of Cicely's life—a cloudlet which, woe to the child, was destined to gather gloom and blackness till it enshrouded, almost engulfed her in its portentous weight. Oh, for the Swinton woods and the merry past of innocence and joy which could never be recalled!

"Alone—quite alone on earth," she had murmured sadly, as at last she rose and sought to shake off the apathy in which she had lain for some time. "Alone!" for Cicely, though she liked Mrs. Fitzalan as a companion, and from the depths of her loving nature would have rejoiced in the existence of a reciprocal affection, yet could not help feeling that there was a barrier between them—a barrier which Mrs. Fitzalan might at any moment render impassable. "Alone!" It has a weird, drear tone, espe-

cially when it is the cry of a young aching heart poured forth with a despair all too realistic in utterance.

"Alone!" And once more she sank into the chair and hid her face, while the tears which had at last come to relieve the mental pressure flowed freely.

But a hand laid on her arm made her look up, and Sir Hubert Fleming's grave face was gazing at her with an earnestness which caused her to wonder and feel almost frightened as she looked at him through her tears.

Would she, as pretty May had done to Harry Durant, pour out to this man the story of her love? No. Cicely came of a different race—to suffer and be silent was the first instinct of her life. She hated Sir Hubert that he had come and found her thus; and dashing away the tear-drops, she asked him somewhat resentfully how he had obtained admittance and what he wanted there.

But Sir Hubert's only answer was a repetition of Cicely's word, "Alone."

"I never knew till now," he said, "how sad and drear it must be for a woman; yet God knows how many of us are alone on earth. I have been alone for years."

"Have you?" said Cicely, scarcely knowing what answer was expected of her, but wishing with all her heart that he had not intruded on her solitude.

"Yes, Cicely, for the last ten years I have wandered to and fro on the earth without one human being to care whether I lived or died. You, my poor child, who have been left an orphan, without relations, can in some degree recognize that even for a man it is a wearisome existence."

"Oh, I don't pity men," answered Cicely, smarting under her own private grief; "they can do as they like, and make people love them when it pleases them, and throw the love away when it becomes a bore."

"Child, where have you learnt such a hard lesson?" And he looked at her in surprise.

She coloured at the mistake she had made by speaking thus, and sought at once to avert it.

"How should I know of myself? But books teach a good deal, Sir Hubert."

"Books; ay, but life teaches more. May you never gain evil experience save in books; may your future path be ever brightened by sunshine."

"Nonsense!" And Cicely got up and shook herself. She was in no humour to brook what she deemed Sir Hubert's platitudes. "Nonsense! If I have no sorrows I shall have no joys."

"Let me bear the sorrows while you sip the joys——"

"Really, Sir Hubert, you must have taken leave of your senses this morning." And she began to laugh hysterically. The cold feeling of despair was circling about her heart, and the effort to be bright and careless almost upset her nervous power.

He took her hand and held it tightly in his own.

"Tell me, child, why were you crying when I came in?"

"For variety, I suppose," she answered, turning away. "One cannot be always laughing."

"No, no," he said, trying to look into her face; "but, as a lonely man myself, I appreciate your pride. What say you, little one, would it be a very fearsome thing to you to cast in your lot with mine, and let us strive to bear together the burden of each other's loneliness?"

"Sir Hubert!" And she snatched the hand he held away from him with a degree of energy which did not augur much favour for his suit.

"Are you so afraid of me as that? Oh, Cicely, I had hoped you might have learned one day to love me."

She did not reply, but stood and looked at him for a few moments; then she said, as though half-asking the question of herself—

"Why should I love you, I wonder?"

"Say rather why should you not? I will be good and true and kind to you; and, Cicely, watching you as I have done of late, I feel that unless you can be faithful to me you will tell me at once that I can have no part in your life."

"I suppose I should be faithful to any man I married; but I do not love you, Sir Hubert; I have never thought of you but as Mrs. Fitzalan's friend."

"Yet we are both alone in the world, Cicely."

"I dare say"—and she turned from him with irritation—"but that does not oblige me to marry the first man who asks me. I can take care of myself."

"You are a proud young queen," he said, smiling, "and I like you none the less for your frankness. He who trusts his future in your hands will never be tortured by lies or deceived by false vows. Would to God that such a lot may be mine, for I have had suffering, Cicely—bitter suffering—one on which I never care to dwell. Only in asking the truth from you I must set the example of giving the whole truth in return. Has Mrs. Fitzalan ever told you that I am a widower?"

"You, Sir Hubert? No; indeed, I always fancied you were a very decided old bachelor."

"No, child, I married when I was very young a fair girl who had scarcely left the schoolroom, and who I believed loved me with a true and lasting love. I took her to London, and we went about everywhere, for Lady Fleming became quite a fashion; and I, foolish idiot that I was, was proud to see her so much admired. Adulation and the homage of the world turned her head, poor girl, and she grew tired of my humdrum self, and one unhappy day she left me to return to my roof no more." He paused, as though overcome by these old recollections, and hid his face in his hands.

"Poor Sir Hubert!" murmured Cicely, into whose eyes the blinding tears had risen, "Poor Sir Hubert! And did she never come back?"

"No, child, she died ten years ago, in utter penury, in this city. Let us draw a veil over the manner of her death, for I can scarcely bear to recall it even now."

There was a long silence between them. Sir Hubert had awakened in Cicely's heart a new interest. It was a strange wooing, but it had not proved an utter failure.

"Yes, he was right," she thought; "they were both alone in the world—both had been cruelly deceived." For Cicely magnified her own troubles till she placed them side by side with his. "Who knows? some day, far on in the misty future, she might marry Sir Hubert—but not now—merciful Heaven!—not now. She could not bear to seat another on the throne she had raised for Harry Durant—he must dash it down himself, and then it mattered little what befell. Sir Hubert Fleming, or a garret by herself—all modes of existence would be much the same, if only they wore out life and the end came quickly."

Scarcely flattering to the baronet would have been this soliloquy could he have known it, but he only saw that she was touched by the tale of his misery, and he strove to take advantage of the ground he believed himself to have gained.

"Will you help me to forget the past and find happiness in the future?" he said at last, almost in a whisper.

"I cannot promise, I cannot promise," she answered, hurriedly. "It would be wicked and unjust."

"You shall have time for consideration, my darling Cicely—weeks, months, if you like—only give me some hope."

"No, Sir Hubert, none. If ever I become a wife I will be true and faithful, and to be that I must——"

"My child, I have been a brute to urge you thus." For Cicely had burst into such a fit of hysterical weeping as totally to bewilder poor Sir Hubert, who could only stand and look at her, totally powerless to assuage the storm.

And all this time where was Mrs. Fitzalan? In another room, waiting impatiently to hear the result of his suit.

That Cicely would refuse him she felt very sure, and therefore perhaps she was scarcely surprised when at last he called her in to soothe and pacify the girl, whose self-control had become, from the excitement of the morning, almost past her own power of management. Never had Mrs. Fitzalan been kinder or more gentle to her young companion. She took her to her room, soothed her with anodynes, and bade her be at peace. She should not be worried into marrying any one unless she liked. She would send Sir Hubert away, and they would go and amuse themselves and forget that he existed. So the smiles came back to Cicely's face, for the hope that Harry Durant had not gone for ever was not so wholly extinct but that it would revive at times; and she wished she had not torn up his letter—the one sole missive she had ever received from him. At seventeen how difficult it is utterly to despair!

They went to the opera in a box which Mrs. Fitzalan did not tell her had come from Sir Hubert; but he himself did not judge it prudent to accompany them as an escort. Several gentlemen of Mrs. Fitzalan's acquaintance came and went, however, in the course of the evening, after the manner of men; and at last Algy Duncombe, who had been 'wandering about the house like an unquiet spirit, arrived to pay his tribute of complimentary attendance—not on the widow, whom he hated—but on Cicely, to whom ever since the evening of her *début* he had always been very courteous and affable, treating her occasionally to a few confidences on the subject of his admiration for May Bertrand, and her mother's superlative objection to himself. He always found Cicely a ready and attentive listener, for she took great interest in the Bertrands from childish recollections; only perhaps of late a hatred of Rose was springing up where love had once been planted,

Mrs. Fitzalan was talking to a Frenchman, so Algy dropped into an unoccupied chair by Cicely's side.

They discussed the house, the beauty, the singing, in fact, went through the usual conventional platitudes, for some minutes, when at last Algy said, "You will forgive me for coming to chat with you, but I am very down in my luck to-night. The Bertrands have left for England."

"The Bertrands gone?"

"Yes, they started to-day. Some important business called them away suddenly. It's rather jolly too, for Durant is going to call on the governor and see what can be done. You understand?"

"Yes," answered Cicely, dreamily. "Mr. Durant has gone with the Bertrands."

"Of course. That is only natural, is it not? But it is very good of him to try and square matters for me. I should have thought he would be afraid of the old lady."

"Ah, she is rather dreadful."

"Dreadful? I should think so. The life she leads poor May is something too awful to contemplate. Rose pleases her better, I imagine. She has higher matrimonial aspirations. But, Miss Fitzalan, what is the matter?"

"The heat—oh, it is nothing." But had not Algy's strong arm supported her she would have fallen on the floor.

In a moment all was commotion and confusion. They carried her out into the *foyer* and used the usual remedies, but for a long time with little avail; and when at last she was restored to consciousness it was an awakening which afforded but little relief, as the poor aching heart within only beat the more strenuously for release.

Mrs. Fitzalan took her at once to the carriage. In the corridor, as they waited for a second till it should be announced, Sir Hubert came up and offered her his arm.

Was this man with the grave colourless face and

melancholy subdued manner fated to be her companion during the long years of her future journey through life?

She shivered as she wrapped her cloak more closely about her shoulders and looked at him.

CHAPTER XVI.

DEB.

SHE was lean and hungry-looking enough as she stood against the railings at the corner of a London street. Pretty well known to the people who dwelt in the neighbourhood, she went by the familiar name of Deb. A mere bundle of untidy, uncleanly rags, she probably would seem to the casual passer-by, yet not a few of the more observant strollers along life's highway would turn more than once to have another look at her as she either swept her crossing with brisk energy or leant, as she was now doing, resting upon her broom. Why people looked twice at her she was too simple-minded to inquire, but that she did evoke a more than ordinary amount of interest sundry stray coppers which found their way into her ragged pocket practically proved. It was a tatterdemalion bonnet she wore, large in size, squashed and shapeless, yet she had managed to bend it picturesquely, and it slouched down on one side over her face, which was lighted up by a pair of wonderfully expressive eyes, veiled by the longest, fullest lashes, which have ever been bestowed on woman—hence, probably, the second, and even third glances of the passers-by. Yet Deb was scarcely beautiful as men-critics prate of beauty. She wanted that fleshiness and warmth of tint which luxury and abundance help to develop; with her, poverty and daily abstinence had robbed her frame of all its roundness, and given her face that half-starved, soured

expression in which there is so much of sadness. Varied as the vagaries of the English clime, though, were Deb's moods, and he who pitied her to-day for her woebegone ungirlish melancholy would perhaps be inclined to chide her to-morrow for the frolicsomeness which was so nearly akin to levity.

A man muffled in rich furs—for the day is cold and the east wind cutting—has just come out of an adjacent house and passes hastily over Deb's crossing.

It is Harry Durant.

For a moment he pauses and slips a silver coin into her palm.

"Thank you kindly, sir," she says, demurely dropping a curtsey and entirely hiding her eyes under their long fringes as she looks down.

He smiles and giving her a careless nod, passes quickly on, among the whirl and business of life, speedily forgetting the existence of Deb, the little sweeper. She, however, is very subdued and quiet for many minutes after he has gone. She solicits pence from no one, but, holding her bit of silver tightly in her hand, stands there as though lost in the labyrinths of some strange dream. Then with her usual fitfulness she suddenly casts off her pensive mood, begins sweeping as though her life depended on her energy, half-singing the while to herself the refrain of one of those merry airs which the organ-grinders contribute to the musical education of the masses. Then she broke into a laugh, and, with the music of a march this time for accompaniment to her actions, she strode back to her usual position by the railings. During her temporary absence, however, it had been filled, and a little wizened man, scarcely less untidy in appearance than Deb herself, was standing there. The clothes he wore had once been good, but had arrived at the stage of shabby gentility, while it was very evident that brushes, combs, and soap were articles in which, as a rule, this small specimen of male humanity

did not traffic. Deb looked the intruder all over curiously. His being there at all, in her vernacular, she would probably have designated as "cheek," had not the fear that perhaps he had come to deprive her of her cross-ing made her silent. But as the man neither moved nor spoke she determined to address him.

"This yere is my corner and my home—you ain't a sweeper, be yer?"

"On the great highroad of the world I would sweep, sweep on for ever for the sake of my dear art," said the man, ambiguously, using as he did so a strong foreign accent.

"Law!" said Deb, dropping her broom on the pavement with a jerk; "there ain't room for two here—I can manage this crossing pretty well alone, thank yer."

"My child, I want your broom not—but your voice," he said, picking up her instrument of labour and handing it to her with as much courtesy as though she had been a duchess.

This speech produced another "Law!" from the astonished Deb, to be followed by a muttered recommendation "that he should sweep the cobwebs out of his own head!"

"Will you to my school come, kindchen? You will be welcome as the stars at evening."

"Ain't got no time for schools—the parson he be always asking of me. In rags, too, at a school—how purty I should look!"

"Art, mein kind, brings not unfrequently gold to her disciples. Sho is a kind, good mistress."

"Is she now? Well, whoever the lady may be, I shouldn't ha' thought so to look at you. When I leaves my crossing for another line o' business I should like it to be money-getting."

"Greed, little one, is a curse. For love only must we work if we would be rewarded. Love for one's art, one's

beautiful art—oh, it is a priceless blessing to feel and have it.”

“I don’t sweep for love, I sweeps for food. But whatever is art, and where is it to be found?”

“Here—here—everywhere. It is a holy inspiration.”

“Well, I don’t understand nothink—they’re beyond me, these big words.”

He took her by the shoulder and looked into her speaking eyes.

“What for do you sing, *meine liebe*?”

“To make the long hours seem short, I suppose.”

“Who gave you the knowledge to make tuneful melody?”

“I dunno. It came like walking, or running, or sweepin’”

“It is the spirit of art which has descended on you. I have watched you often. You are a born *artiste*—the inspiration which is in you will, with education, produce æsthetic result.”

“My heart! and to think that I am all that! How ever did you find it out?”

“You shall hear music, child—beautiful music, which shall impress your senses, and wake that power of love which in your breast has been till now sleeping.”

Deb pushed her large bonnet off her head, and stood looking at him in silent wonder; then she pulled it on again with a jerk as she muttered, “Mad—mad as a hatter,” between her closed lips.

“*Liebchen*, have you ever heard a spirit-stirring melody?”

“Don’t know rightly what it is, but if it’s musicianers as you mean—don’t the German band play rare, that’s all! And ain’t I learnt all their tunes, and I sings ’em to myself afore I go to sleep of nights.”

“I knew it, I knew it. When my predictions were they ever unfulfilled?”

"Hallo, Wurzel! So you have got hold of little Deb. Best leave her, my good fellow; you will not do her any good."

The speaker was Harry Durant, returning hurriedly to his domicile for something he had forgotten.

"Leave her—leave the beautiful in art to hide under a bushel its wondrous sweetness! Nein, nein, mein Herr. What for have I, then, founded my school and devoted the earnings of my life?"

"As you will, as you will, my good Wurzel; only I would be sure of success before I took the girl from her broom. She can never go back to it, you know." And he passed on.

Deb's brow had puckered itself into a frown; her eyes flashed with an unwonted fire.

"He is a great artist himself, yet he would stones throw for others to stumble over. Fie on such coldness; I love it not," said the German, more to himself than to Deb. "Yet perhaps he is right. If the child has not a voice what shall her art do for her in this working world?" And he half-turned away.

"You ain't agoing without giving me nothink after all they big promises? That is too bad." And Deb put herself in front of him.

"No, the art-love must conquer. If I fail it is but a sacrifice at the great shrine. And what matter? I will find work for the girl. It is well, child; come to me at seven—this very night we will see. You will hear voices like the strains of the angels; we will discover if yours shall commingle, and for the future we will decide."

And Deb returned to her sweeping. But the presages of a coming change hung about her, and her work had already lost in importance and energy.

Presently Mr. Durant passed again, but he did not bestow, as he was wont to do, a nod or a smile upon the girl; for, living as he did but a few doors from her

crossing, he was one of her patrons, and had, in fact, selected her in his own mind for a "model" when the whim should seize him to settle down and return with industry to his easel. Hence, perhaps, some of his annoyance at finding old Wurzel, the mad German, had marked the girl for instruction in the art of music. Now, however, something had evidently put Harry Durant's usually well-accorded temperament out of tune, for he strode on, with his furs wrapped tightly round him, and his hands in his pockets, without casting any glances on the passers-by, be they whom they might.

Deb watched him till he was out of sight.

"Well, the likes o' he has his ups and downs as well as I. Something has made the yeast rise—I wonders what?—hope it's no bad news he's got, just when fortin' has smiled on me too. I'd help him if I know'd how. But lawks, ain't I a silly to talk?" And she went into an immoderate fit of laughter, till the tears coursed each other down her pale cheeks.

Some two hours later Harry Durant returned slowly. He sauntered along the street as though clogs had been fastened to his ankles and held him. It was evident the business on which he had been engaged had not proved successful; and Deb, who had not yet relinquished her broom, marked the change which had come over him, even though the gathering twilight had begun to render objects somewhat difficult to discern.

He stopped when he came to where she was standing.

"Would you like to earn a silver coin, girl?" he asked. "If so, I will send you on an errand."

"Yes, sir, thank you, if so be as I can be back by seven."

"Oh, it will not take long. But why should you be back by seven?"

"Please, for the music at the German's, sir."

"Oh, I forgot; Wurzel is going to make a fool of you like the rest. You had much better not go."

"Please, sir, I must; there's somethin' as is a drivin' me to it."

Harry Durant shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, let me know how you get on; and if you want any help you'll know where to find it. It will not be long first, I expect. Come to my house in a quarter of an hour for the letter I want to send."

There was an imperious tone about Mr. Durant which was unlike him and savoured of bitterness—it was evident things had not gone well with him on that particular day.

A quarter of an hour later Deb presented herself at the door, and was shown, according to orders, into Mr. Durant's sitting-room. It was the first time in her life that she had peeped into the dwellings of the rich; and, holding her ragged skirts close to her, lest they should contaminate the walls of a place which to her unsophisticated mind seemed like some fairy palace, she stood half-trembling on the threshold.

"Come in; don't be afraid. I want to give you your instructions. I wonder if you can manage to hold your tongue?"

"I should think so," answered Deb, "'specially when I ain't got no one to tell."

"But you might some day be cross-questioned. What then?"

"If you said I was to know nothin' I'd know nothin' "

"That means if I paid you for your silence."

"I don't want no pay. You've been good to me and given me many a coin. Sure I could do a turn for you."

"Can you read?"

"Lord bless yer, it don't do to ask, 'cos if they School Boards didn't think as I was over age they'd have me up."

"And you don't want to learn?"

"Ain't I going to be a musicianer?—that's learnin' "

Mr. Durant laughed, and probably would have entered *con amore* into the subject of the girl's hopes and fears in

life, if some secret annoyance had not prevented him from being especially interested in anything at that particular moment.

"Well, take this letter to 24, Clare Street, ask to see Miss Wilson, give it into her hands, bring me back an answer, and you shall have half-a-crown for your trouble."

"I'll take the letter with pleasure, but I won't have the half-crown, thank you, sir. Folks might say as I'd stole it."

"Well, run along; we'll settle the money question afterwards."

Deb did as she was bid, and in less than ten minutes her nimble feet brought her to Clare Street. The houses were small but tidy, and from the general aspect of the place it might be inferred that most of their inmates were in that state of life known as genteel poverty.

Deb rang the bell at No. 24, and asked to see Miss Wilson. After a somewhat fierce altercation with a slatternly servant-girl not much older than herself, that functionary consented to inform Miss Wilson that "a young lady" wished to speak to her, and Deb was accordingly ushered up into the second floor. It was a cosy little room; a bright fire was burning in the grate, but there was no other light, and like a dim shadow she saw the form of a recumbent woman on a sofa, but no one spoke.

"Please, mem, I'm Deb, and I've brought a letter," said the little sweeper, half-startled by the sound of her own words.

"Who is it from?" asked a nasal voice which sounded somewhat harshly on Deb's ears.

"Dunno the gentleman's name, but he lives 'ard by my crossing."

"Whoever he is he has chosen a queer messenger. Here, give me the letter and stir up the fire; I cannot move easily."

Deb did as she was bid, wishing the while that the

slatternly maid would bring in a candle. "Shadows from the fitful fire-light" awed her, for she managed to see that the human form on the sofa was little more than a shadow herself, and she could not help wondering what lien there could be between that handsome, pleasant gentleman and this dreary-looking woman.

"'Tisn't love, for she's too old," she thought; "and she ain't his mother, for she's a miss. Lawks, isn't it rum, tho'!"

And while Deb was pondering and taking in all the surroundings Miss Wilson had opened the letter.

"Mr. Durant," she muttered almost below her breath. "After all these years what can have occurred that he should write?"

"Get me a light, idiot; how can I see in the dark?" she went on, turning sharply on Deb.

Deb, trembling with fright, pushed a candle between the bars of the grate to light it; but this untidy trick passed unnoticed by Miss Wilson, who lay on her couch engrossed in her letter, while Deb held the blackened candle and took a survey meanwhile of the hard-featured, sour-visaged woman. Stricken by some illness which had deprived her of her agility to such an extent that she could only walk by the use of sticks, she had become under affliction cross-grained and vindictive to a degree those who had known her in the palmy days of her youth would scarcely have imagined possible.

"Tell him he is a fool to put his hand in other people's trap-holes," she said, having read the letter to the end. "If he wants help from me he had best come and seek it. I won't write a line. Do you understand?"

"I hear what you says; but it ain't very perlite language to take to a gentleman," answered Deb.

"I wonder where you learnt politeness, you little drab? Do as I tell you."

"The gentleman told me to fetch an answer. Such

talk as that isn't worth the carryin' If he wants you to help him you might do it—surely I would if I know'd how."

Miss Wilson half-rose from her back with a sudden spring and sat glaring at the girl.

"How dare you speak to me like that, you minx? I'll teach Mr. Durant to send such messengers as you."

"Don't ee, don't ee, now—I am that frightened. Just give me a line to the gentleman and let me go. I have business of my own, and I'm in an awful hurry. It's only for he as I'd ha' come."

"I will not write a word, I tell you. Go to Mr. Durant, tell him to come if he wants aught of me, but that if he was not in love with a false face he would not mix himself up in the matter. Now go."

But Deb did not turn to depart as speedily as might have been expected; she stood gazing on Miss Wilson for a minute or two as though she were trying to take in slowly the sense of her last words; then, without any sharp answer or other remark save a brief "Good-night, mem," she went downstairs into the street, walking more demurely than she had ever done in her life before, murmuring to herself as she did so—

"In love with a false face—in love with a false face."

Strange that in giving Harry Durant a somewhat detailed account of her interview with Miss Wilson she failed to tell him of the sentence which had haunted her and never left her lips during her walk back from Clare Street.

CHAPTER XVII.

GATHERING THUNDER-CLOUDS.

"I CAN do nothing for the boy beyond continuing his allowance of £300 a year, an income which he has known pretty well how to squander during the last three years. Times are bad with these cursed foreign bonds down at zero, besides he ought to learn to do something for himself."

"Three hundred a year is scarcely what *your* son would be expected to marry on," suggested Mr. Durant, quietly. According to his promise to May he was seeking to investigate how matters stood with the elder Duncombe.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not; but who the devil wants him to marry? I don't. If it is the lady's family, they had better provide the means."

"I did not commit myself by saying there was any especial lady in the case," answered Harry Durant, smiling; "only I fancy Master Algy seems rather matrimonially inclined."

"Pooh, nonsense! Thirty is quite soon enough for any man to marry—Algy is too young."

"A man marries, I presume, at the time of life when he meets with a lady likely to suit him as a companion. Some are fortunate at an early period of their career; others have to wait."

"And numbers make a horrid mess of the whole concern," grumbled Mr. Duncombe, who was inclined to be very bearish and disagreeable; and it required all Mr. Durant's tact and endurance to prevent himself from losing his temper.

"At all events, I may conclude that you would put the £300 a year into settlement?"

"Certainly not; I have told you I don't want the boy

married, and I won't do a thing. I shall not take principal out of my house to hand over to trustees, if that be what you expect. He can have £300 a year from the business, and that is all he will get till I am underground."

And with this ultimatum Mr. Durant was perforce compelled to take his leave.

That Mrs. Bertrand would listen to any proposal for a marriage with May on such terms he felt very sure was hopeless, but he had done his best, though he had utterly failed in the result, and was exceedingly prone to the idea that the firm of Duncombe and Co. was by no means in a flourishing condition, and that it was inability rather than disinclination that made Mr. Duncombe determined not to help his son.

"Either May must give up all thought of Algy or they must wait till the tide turns—they are young enough," was Harry's conclusion as he walked westward after the not very pleasing interview he had had in the City counting-house.

Three weeks had passed since Harry Durant had left Paris; and short though the time had been it had left its mark, for he looked fagged and worn, as though he had been both worried and over-fatigued by the stress of private business. Still he had not forgotten his promise to May, and after several useless roundabout inquiries had resolved to beard paterfamilias in his den and discover the best or the worst at once.

Harry Durant hated to be baulked in anything he had undertaken to arrange, and was excessively annoyed at the non-success of his venture; in fact, with every step he took his anger seemed to increase, and by the time he reached Deb's crossing he was enjoying anything but his usual cheerful equanimity. The turn matters in which he was more individually interested had taken of late was scarcely a pleasing one, and a letter he had received from Paris that very morning was, perhaps, the real cause of the

inward rankle which, with a certain amount of self-deception, he was vainly seeking to ascribe to Mr. Duncombe's rough reception of his suggestions for Algy's welfare. The letter which had vexed him was from the "Grey Widow" herself, and was, perhaps, more offensive in tone than that there was any practical wrong to complain of. To use Mr. Durant's own expression, it was evident she was "kicking over the traces," and how to hold her in more firmly in the future was the knowledge for which he had been beating about in his brain for the last two hours. He thought he had a tolerable amount of power over her, but it was obvious since he left Paris that something had occurred which had caused his ascendancy to wane. He must return at once to the French capital; but before he did so would not some farther hold over Mrs. Fitzalan be an accessory worth attaining? There was but one person in the world who could help him, and that was a certain Miss Wilson, of whose address, after a good deal of difficulty and some cost, he had only become possessed that morning.

Conning all these things over in his mind as he walked along, his eye fell on Deb. The messenger was worthy of the mission—he would send her to Miss Wilson—with what result we already know—a result which by no means increased Harry Durant's placidity as he listened to Deb's tale.

"How the deuce did she know the letter came from me? I never signed it."

"She twigged your mark, I s'pose, 'cos as I didn't know your name I couldn't tell her."

"Knew my writing, did she? Well, she must be a sharp one, for she never saw it but once, and that is ever so many years ago."

"Oh, she's sharp as knives—shouldn't like to handle her pertickler. But since she knows who you are, you'd best go and see her yourself, if you wants anything."

"Which means *you* decline to go again?"

"Not I; I'll do anything, whatever you like, if it's any mortal good; but that there old woman beats most of the parties I know, and I see some funny ones too."

"Well, I suppose I shall have to pay her a visit myself," growled Durant, who was thoroughly out of humour. "Here, girl, here's your money. It's not your fault you did not succeed."

Deb looked at the coin he laid on the table till the tears gathered in her eyes, but she did not attempt to touch it.

"Thank you, sir. Good evening," she said, after a minute's pause, and vanished, leaving Mr. Durant too absorbed to notice her. It was not till some half-hour later that he saw the half-crown still lying on the table, and remarked to himself—

"Queer little girl, that. I wonder why she won't take the money? Yes, I will see Miss Wilson before I return to Paris. Now I suppose I must dress, and go and dine with the Bertrands."

And by force of will he shook off the preoccupied look which the complications of life had given him of late, and entered his aunt's drawing-room bright and joyous as his friends ever knew him. It was an intimate little party of six, Mr. Durant and one other man being the only invited guests; and, perhaps because Harry Durant felt that he had not carried out the mission entrusted to him by May as successfully as either she or he could have wished, he talked rapidly and agreeably, to fill up the time before he should be compelled to tell her that Algy's fears about his father's affairs were all too well-founded. Mrs. Bertrand was in the happiest of moods. Harry had become so tractable and attentive of late that she thought the most sanguine expectations as to his marrying one of the "dear girls" were about to be realized, and she overwhelmed him with civilities accordingly. Altogether, to judge from

external appearances, the unanimity and general good feeling which prevailed around that well-spread dinner-table could scarcely be exceeded; and yet beneath the smooth, plausible surface how many hopes and fears, joys and sorrows lay concealed! Except the squire, who never allowed the even current of his life to be troubled by petty intrigues and amalgamations, there was not one mind there that was not revolving on a private axis of which the beholders knew neither the workings nor the force; yet how smoothly the machinery seemed to run—for awhile! The stranger, whom Harry Durant had never seen before, was the first to jar the delicate inner workmanship, by one of those random hits which make their mark unwittingly.

"So report says Fleming is going to be married," he announced, carelessly.

"Not to the 'Grey Widow'—she would never dare!" was Mr. Durant's unguarded answer.

"No, no, no; Fleming is far too sentimental an enthusiast to go in for widows. The future Lady Fleming is, they say, a bud just opening into beauty."

"Dear me, how interesting! Pray tell us the name of the bud?" asked the hostess, with a slight sneer in her tone.

"Well, my dear Mrs. Bertrand, you know it is only Paris gossip at secondhand. I got my information from a man who arrived this morning. I dare say you know more than I do about the girl from nobody knows where, whom Mrs. Fitzalan has made the fashion this winter."

"Cicely—our old lodge-keeper's grand-daughter—she is going to marry Sir Hubert Fleming! Impossible!"

"Yet my informant is tolerably reliable," answered the man quietly, while both the girls exclaimed in chorus—

"Oh, I am so glad! Dear little Cis—fancy her as Lady Fleming!"

The squire, too, put in his word of rejoicing. There was but one voice at the table that was silent. Harry Durant ate his moustache voraciously, while his cheek

paled and a fierce light shone in his angry eyes. Mrs. Bertrand beheld it for a moment and quailed. He was not, then, so wholly theirs as she had imagined. But who knows? this new entanglement might work out the hoped-for issue in time; and there was some sincerity in the tone in which she rejoiced with the rest over the good fortune which would carry "that hateful little pauper minx out of the way." (This in a private parenthesis.)

Still Harry Durant did not utter—how could he trust himself to speak? Blasphemies on Mrs. Fitzalan's duplicity were blazing too hotly in his mind for him to dare give vent to his feelings in the present society, for never for an instant did it enter his head to imagine that Cicely cared for Fleming. For some minutes, while numerous questions were being asked by the ladies, he was allowed to chew the cud of his annoyance unobserved; no one save the squire remarked how two or three glasses of wine were drunk off consecutively, as though by their help to steady the equilibrium of a mind which for a time had nearly lost its balance.

It had been the end of dinner before this piece of gossip had been agitated, and shortly the ladies rose to leave the room. More wine and no words on the part of Harry Durant, who, although not altogether an abstemious man, had never been known to infringe the limits prescribed by good sense and decorum. The squire had changed the conversation; with his usual quiet observance he had noted how distasteful was this topic to his nephew; but the newsmonger who had come among them, like all gossips, hugged the idea of having told them something they did not know before, and would not let the subject go. He began to discuss Sir Hubert Fleming—his first marriage—its unhappy conclusion—in fact, all his antecedents down to the smallest known or guessed minutiae, till he rejoiced once again over the fresh life this engagement to Cicely would impart to the melancholy, till now unhappy Fleming.

"It's a d—— lie—the whole thing—from beginning to end!" thundered Harry Durant, whose patience under the influence of good wine was quite exhausted.

He who had brought the news started to his feet.

"Sir, how dare you——"

But a "Come, come, let us join the ladies," and a wink from the squire, checked the unfinished sentence; and the man who had only spoken on the authority of gossip perhaps regretted his careless announcement as he marked the situation, for his next words were conciliatory.

"Perhaps it is *not* true," he said. "If you remember, I prefaced my statement as gossip."

"People should not speak of what they know nothing about. They are all friends of mine to whom you have alluded, and I think I should know more of their affairs than you do," grumbled Harry Durant.

The squire rose; and, slapping his nephew kindly on the shoulder, said—"Come along, Harry, my boy; let us go and have some music."

"No, thank you, sir; please let me be excused; I have a splitting headache to-night, and am scarcely a fit companion for my aunt and cousins. Commend me to them, and let me 'go home.'"

Thus the pleasant dinner, begun under favourable auspices, came to an untoward termination; though not even Rose, who "interested" herself, as she said, in cousin Harry, guessed the real truth about his abrupt departure, for the two men were loyal and kept good faith—neither by look nor word did they hint at the ebullition of feeling they had just witnessed. Once in the street, Harry Durant strode rapidly towards his home. It was too late to seek Miss Wilson that night, but next morning he would see her at the earliest hour possible, and then once more *en route* for Paris. But *l'homme propose et Dieu dispose*. The star of Harry Durant's luck was not in the ascendant on

that particular evening. About half-way between the house where he had been dining and his own lodgings he stopped.

"Home—what was the use of going home? It was scarcely possible he would be able to endure solitude cooped up between four walls; and as for sleep, that was not likely to come and help him. There were lots of places open. The club—d—— the club—he would go where life was briskest, pleasure at its zenith—play, anything—what matter, so the time went?—till the morning."

The influence of his uncle's good wine had not passed off, or he would have remembered that coolness and deliberation were the only weapons by which Mrs. Fitzalan was likely to be foiled, if she were really seeking to subvert his influence over Cicely, and that recklessness on his part would but prove his own destruction. Scarcely, however, in his soberest moments could he have guessed how thoroughly the worst was about to be realized. He walked along Piccadilly towards the Haymarket. The night was still young, and numerous vehicles of every kind were passing on their noisy way; but Harry Durant heeded them not, and, plunging into their midst, began to cross the road. He had done it hundreds of times before; but now a hansom, coming at full speed round the corner, dashed against him before he had time to get out of the way, and in another instant he was lying under the horse's feet. He was instantly raised by some unknown friendly hand, but only to become cognizant of the fact that he could not stand; his leg was broken, and grateful might he be if this were the only injury he had received. He never lost consciousness for a moment, though wincing and writhing with pain, but bade them drive him at once to his lodgings and send for his own doctor, instead of taking him to the hospital, as some one among the crowd had benevolently suggested.

When the morning broke Harry was tossing sleeplessly

on a fevered couch, muttering names and scraps of sentences, which revealed to the good doctor who attended him how difficult it would be to ensure the quietude necessary to re-knit the fractured limb under an amount of mental pressure which seemed to keep the mind perpetually on the rack.

"Send for Deb—she'll help me if she can—I want her to take a letter—send for Deb," he had perpetually repeated all through the day succeeding the accident ; but no one heeded it—they thought it was in the mere utterance of delirium that he talked of the sweeper-girl. When, however, on the following day, he awoke from a quiet sleep, and, after writing a few lines, once more desired them to send for Deb, they knew it was no incoherent wanderings which prompted him to ask for her. But, for the first time for months, the crossing had not been swept—the child with the large eyes and the tatterdemalion bonnet was not there. She had gone, as others had done before her, to climb the ladder of life ; and even while Harry Durant was clamouring for her she was already standing on the first rung.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RIVEN LIVES.

"*AGIR est aisé, attendre est ce qu'il y a de plus difficile au monde.*" This axiom of George Sand was what Cicely was feeling acutely in practice, though of the mere theory she knew nothing. Not a word, a line, or a sign from Harry Durant through all these long days and longer weeks had reached her, and this from the best of reasons—that Mrs. Fitzalan had carefully suppressed all intelligence

of the absentee, somewhat frequently though he had vouchsafed it in the early part of his absence. It was, in fact, the want of replies, or at least of satisfactory replies, which had irritated him against Mrs. Fitzalan, and made him feel that some stronger coercion was necessary to keep her still amenable to his wishes and his authority. The news about his accident had been sent to Paris in due course, but this Mrs. Fitzalan had, as she would have said, kept from Cicely "out of tender regard for her feelings." Nothing but little innuendoes about Rose had reached the girl; and stung to the quick by the inward knowledge that she had wasted a single thought on Harry Durant, she called all her self-respect into play, and, in seeking to forget his very existence, accepted, more or less, the increasing attention which Sir Hubert Fleming so assiduously heaped upon her. Ever since the night at the opera he had hovered about her path like a shadow, saying but little, pressing his suit not at all, but always there—almost oppressive in silent offices of courtesy. Sometimes Cicely would shiver as she looked up suddenly and saw this man's eyes as usual gazing on her.

"My fate—alas! my fate!" she would murmur, as she turned about in her mind to find, if possible, some mode of escape. Now she is standing by an open window, though the day is cold, but her head is throbbing and feverish, and not even the chilling winds of early spring will cool the hot aching of her brow. A letter is in her hand—she has read it and re-read it so many times that she almost knows it by heart; yet once again she peruses it as carefully as she did at the very first. It is from Sir Hubert Fleming, who urges his love very strongly, and pleads for an answer in the name of his long, patient waiting—"but much though he loves her, begs that it may be a negative one, unless in her heart she feels she can be faithful to the end."

Mrs. Fitzalan has entered the room quietly while she is still studying Sir Hubert's missive.

"Does a girl's first love-letter, and from such a suitor, require so much consideration?" asks the widow, smiling. "I am surprised, Cis; I imagined you would have answered it by this time."

"Faithful to the end," Mrs. Fitzalan. "What does he mean by that? If I do marry Sir Hubert, do you think I should be unfaithful to him?"

"Good gracious, what nonsense! No, of course not; but Sir Hubert is rather specious in his way of putting an argument. Take it all for what it is worth—a few mere words."

"Perhaps I had better take the whole letter for a few mere words," said Cicely, quietly. "I honour and respect Sir Hubert, and am rather sorry for him—he looks so melancholy at times—but, Mrs. Fitzalan, I do not love him."

"Never mind, dear; pity is akin to love. Try to console with his melancholy, and you will get on all right. Recollect Sir Hubert is a brilliant *parti*, such as a girl like you could scarcely have hoped to make."

"But I do not love him," repeated Cicely, meditatively, as though talking to herself.

"Cicely, don't be a fool, or you will make me seriously angry. A chit like you should know nothing of love. It would be both indelicate and indecorous if you did love him. Marry him and behave yourself; the love will come after."

"But suppose it comes for some one else?" pleaded the girl.

"That is impossible when you are once married."

"Is it? I did not know marriage was such a safeguard. Did you love Mr. Fitzalan when you married him, I wonder?"

The widow grew scarlet—then pale.

"You should not ask home questions," she said. "It is not always convenient to be reminded of the past."

"If I thought marriage would be a safeguard against every thought that would ever come, I would accept Sir Hubert," murmured Cicely, softly.

Mrs. Fitzalan smiled.

"Don't laugh at me, please. You know what I mean. Do you think the recollection of the vow I had taken would never leave me, but keep me always faithfully in the right road?"

"To a young woman possessed of your remarkable sensitiveness I should think it would. At all events, I would give it a trial if I were you." And anxious though Mrs. Fitzalan was that this match should come about, yet she could not wholly hide a certain satirical tone in her voice as she answered Cicely's well-meant scruples. It jarred on Cicely unpleasantly.

"If you please, Mrs. Fitzalan, I would rather not marry Sir Hubert," she said, promptly.

"Then you will go back before this day month to Swinton Vicarage, and be seen in the circles of fashionable life no more," was the as prompt rejoinder.

"Why? Are you tired of me already?"

"It does not suit me to keep you here any longer, and it does suit me that you should marry Sir Hubert."

Cicely gave a deep sigh.

"No one cares for me," she said, piteously. "I wonder why grand-dad was taken away?"

"In order that you might marry Sir Hubert, I should imagine." And the sneer came back to the lady's voice.

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how unkind you are! In the whole wide world there is no one to be kind to poor me." And she laid her head on the table and began to sob convulsively.

"Really, Cicely, you are too absurd. A man offers you the devotion of his life, and you sit whimpering such nonsense as that."

"If I could only love him——"

"You aggravate me beyond all mortal endurance. I shall leave you awhile to your reflections—see that they bring you to a speedy acceptance of Sir Hubert, and thank God for giving you so good and honourable a husband." And for some time after Mrs. Fitzalan took her departure Cicely sat and cried.

"What should she do? what could she do? If Mr. Durant were only there to advise her! If he said 'Marry Sir Hubert,' she would accept the sacrifice at once. If he said 'Marry Sir Hubert,'" she repeated, and then she grew scarlet and wept afresh at the train of thought her own words had suggested. "To be alone for ever in the world would be very miserable, and no one seemed to care much what became of her—even Mrs. Fitzalan talked about turning her out"—was the next reflection, when her tears had nearly spent themselves. "She would try to be a good and dutiful, if not a loving, wife to this man who offered her so much; and as for happiness, perhaps it would come in time."

So after another half-hour spent in more thinking and fresh tears Cicely wrote her simple letter:—

"DEAR SIR HUBERT,

"I will do my best to be faithful and true—if you will help me and tell me what is right.

"CICELY."

It was a strange acceptance, and to most men would have been somewhat unsatisfactory; but Sir Hubert, remembering the difference in their years, and regarding only the honesty of purpose of the girl he was going to take to his heart, found no fault in the scant professions. Once, in years gone by, when they had been lavished profusely, they had ended in deception; with fewer promises he thought perhaps the chances of a life of happiness might be greater. He little knew at what cost those few lines had been penned, or perchance the preliminaries of the

marriage might never have been arranged. Long before this final letter Mrs. Fitzalan had circulated the report that they were engaged; hence the rumours which, reaching England, had ended in Harry Durant's broken leg. Now her best endeavours were to be used that the ceremony should be completed before his recovery would allow him to appear on the scene.

Thus, with undue haste and few preparations, it came about that Cicely married Sir Hubert. On a cold, wet morning, in the early spring, the nuptial service was performed, with nothing in the weather or out-of-door surroundings to cheer the heart of the young bride, who, all the time that she was being dressed in her trailing silk and adorned with the ornaments which were the bridegroom's presents, was wishing herself back again in the Swinton woods—back in those happy days of early childhood, before contact with the world had marred her first outburst of young joy, or men had come with professions of love to overshadow the sunshine on her path. Yet she was only seventeen—but what so experience-bringing, so ageing as a heart-history?

She looked pale as the stars at evening, while her eyes shone like orbs of fire, as they bore her to the altar, Mrs. Fitzalan, in the freshest of toilettes, keeping ever close to her side, and seeking to reassure her in the softest, most blandishing of tones. At last it is all over, and with faltering steps, just touching shyly Sir Hubert's arm with the tips of her fingers, Cicely leaves Mrs. Fitzalan's house to go in a little well-appointed brougham, to the station. For a moment on the threshold of the outer door she raises her eyes. A tiny crowd has assembled to witness the departure of the *jeune mariée*. Foremost amongst them, leaning on two sticks, is Harry Durant. An ashen hue, such as her face has never worn before, passes over Cicely's features—she clutches now Sir Hubert's arm for support. He looks at her aghast.

"My darling, are you ill? Has all this been too much for you?"

"Yes, yes; let us go quickly."

He almost lifts her into the carriage, and the door is shut. They start at full speed on the matrimonial journey, so inauspiciously commenced for both.

It was true, then. Mr. Durant paused for a few seconds to recover breath as he watched the carriage dash speedily out of sight; and then, with an imprecation such as few men utter with all their heart twice in a lifetime, he turned into the house, limping slowly by the aid of his sticks up the staircase to Mrs. Fitzalan's residence *au premier*. All the guests have not departed, and Harry Durant's fierce and turbulent face is scarcely in keeping with the festive scene as he appears like a war-god amongst them. That something has gone wrong every one seems to know by intuition—only on Mrs. Fitzalan's face there are no clouds. Serene in her calm, well-developed beauty she sails across to speak to him—"hopes he has quite recovered from his accident—wishes he had arrived before—he ought to have given the bride away—they would have put the wedding off had they known he was so nearly well," etc., etc.

To all these meaningless remarks Harry listened as a man in a dream.

"Does Cicely love this man?" at last he asked. "If not, by what right have you given her to him?"

"Does she love him, Mr. Durant! What young girl does not love riches and a position? It is not every village lass who gets the chance of becoming 'my lady.' Only six months out of the lodge, too!"

"The less said on that subject the better," thundered Mr. Durant, "or I may have a few remarks to make which may not be wholly palatable."

"Harry!" And Mrs. Fitzalan's voice lost its petulance, her face its calm, as she looked at him with pleading eyes, and spoke in a piteous tone.

"Harry, will you not wait till all this world has gone before we have an explanation?"

"For your sake let us trust it will be a straightforward one," he said, as, dropping into a chair, he assented to her wishes; caring more, perhaps, to avoid a public scandal for his own sake than for hers. This unexpected advent had fallen somewhat as an ill omen on the wedding party; and, without knowing exactly why, the guests seemed to feel that something of disagreeable import had occurred; and each forming his or her conjectures as to what had happened, they speedily withdrew, leaving the two combatants to fight their private battle alone, with such weapons as they each knew best how to wield. The manly attack was fierce and to the purpose, the woman's defence evasive and feline—for no one knew better when to lie crouched and when to spring than did Mrs. Fitzalan.

"She had done all for the best—how could she know?—no letter of disapproval or reproach had ever reached her—the French postal system was so defective. Nothing but rumours about his intended marriage with Miss Bertrand. She quite thought, when he placed Cicely with her, the promise was she was to do the best she could for her in life according to the light given her; and what could be better than a marriage with Sir Hubert? Of course she thought Mr. Durant's interest in the girl was purely from charity; and how could she know that it was a deeper one?" Here was her little spring as she looked at him from under her half-closed lids.

"Who said I had a deeper interest?" he asked. "I gave Cicely in charge to you, and to me alone you were responsible for her happiness. You had no right to marry her without my consent."

"It is done now," she replied, soberly. "I am sorry you are not pleased, but Cicely's happiness was my first consideration. You little know, Mr. Durant, how I have learnt to love her."

"Pah! Look here, Margaret Denham; let there be no disguises between you and me."

"Not that name, for God's sake—not that name!"

"Ha, ha!"—and he laughed fiercely—"I thought that would make you quail. You have played me false—traitorously false—you have married the girl I had selected for my own wife to a man for whom I do not believe she cares a straw. What bitterer wrong do you think you could inflict? And you expect that in submission to your wishes I shall let you flourish!"

"It is only a retort for an old grievance," she replied, with all the passion latent in her nature expressed in her voice. "I have not forgotten the past, if you have, Harry Durant. Besides, you cannot injure me—you have no proof."

For answer he took a paper from his pocket and unfolded it before her, guarding it well, lest she should snatch it from him.

"Miss Wilson! It is all a lie. She has been dead these three years."

"Strange that I saw her only six and thirty hours ago, and stood by her as she gave me that paper—wrote those lines!"

Utterly discomfited, Mrs. Fitzalan cowered in abject terror at his feet.

"Spare me," she said. "How could I know your feelings? I did the best for Cicely—by Heaven I did—even to signing a deed settling everything on her at my death."

"Which paper, as you know, is not worth its stamp. Have you told Fleming the whole truth?"

"Not a word—he did not ask it."

"Then that tale remains for me. I will not intrude on the happiness of their honeymoon," he added, bitterly, "but afterwards he shall know everything."

"Oh, Harry, you will not be so wicked—you will not mar her life and his by interference now?"

"Mar her life and his! Then it is true: the girl did prefer me to him?"

"It cannot matter now. She thought you were going to marry Rose Bertrand."

"And who told her so but you—false devil that you are?"

Mrs. Fitzalan started to her feet.

"How dare you, sir, use such words as those to me? How have I ever injured you? Nay, in the past would I not have laid down my life to save one hair of yours from injury? Because I committed an indiscretion which you in your pride thought fit never to forgive, is that any reason why I am to be followed up and tortured as you list? For years we never met—why did you cross my path again, armed too with the knowledge of all the delinquencies of my life, and ready to proclaim them to the world if I failed to obey your whims? It was both mean and cowardly. Do your worst; I defy you. Give Cicely her due. I have no grudge against her—save that she stood in my path, I would not have harmed her. But I thank God that I have wounded you and taught you that a woman has power to strike, even when she has fallen as low as, in your proud estimation, I have."

Like a wrathful Camilla she stood erect, uttering her words with a quick force which made him almost breathless; then she swept out of the room and ended an interview which she herself had brought to a climax.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE ART SCHOOL.

THE old German sits placidly by the fire, smoking his pipe, with a score on his knee. Every now and then he looks with a pleased expression round the room, in which some seven or eight young people are amusing themselves during an evening hour of recreation. He starts up, however, as the door opens and a comely-looking woman, some eight-and-thirty years of age, comes in, followed by Deb, the sweeper. Deb looks pale and frightened and shy as she shrinks behind honest Gretchen—old Wurzel's thrifty, housewifely daughter. Very little of the street-girl is apparent about Deb, except her rags, as she stands there, with downcast eyes, holding very tight to the friendly hand with which Gretchen has bestowed on her a kindly pressure.

"The new pupil!" cry the "kinder," as old Wurzel calls them, in chorus, and Deb is at once surrounded by fresh young faces—none of which, however, eclipse her own in loveliness—as, shy and silent, she stands there looking wonderingly at them out of her marvellous eyes. Charity and loving kindness are the passwords of the old German's religious creed; so every one in that little group has a word of welcome for the stranger. Were they not all foundlings the master had brought home to nurture and to teach, and had they not all passed through the same ordeal from lonely fright that she is doing now?

"Sing, kinder, sing," says the master, while he himself strikes a few notes on an instrument which stands close by.

In a moment the room resounds with the soft, sweet voices of the youthful choir raised in unison; and Deb, as

though transfixed, listens breathlessly, while the tears course each other as though unbidden down her cheeks.

"The power of the beautiful it is awakened in her soul!" cries the old man, enthusiastically, as the children finish their melody. "Will you too join in making song, my daughter?"

But Deb shook her head.

"Let me go," she whispered softly; "this is no place for me—it's a deal too grand."

"No, no, little sister, you must bide with us now you have come," said a chorus of young voices. "The master will teach you as he has taught us, and you won't be frightened long."

"But my rags," pleaded Deb, "they make me that ashamed—but I can't better them, for pence is rare."

"You shall have one of my frocks—Miss Gretchen gave me two," suggested a girl about sixteen, who, though nearly the same age, was much bigger than fragile Deb.

"She shall have a tidy one of her own if she is a good girl and likely to deserve it," interrupted Gretchen. "You have no need to mind your rags here, Deb. We have all worn them some time—I had neither shoes nor stockings when I was a little one in Germany."

The daintiness of Deb's nature, latent though it was, kept in subjection by privation and a want of knowledge of better things, was yet sufficiently alive to kindle at the thought of clean neat clothing—she who had always loathed herself for the rags circumstances had forced her to wear.

Her rising spirits received, however, a momentary check from the master's reminding words—

"For one whole week, child, you have promised your broom to keep—is it not so?"

"Ah, I forgot, sir."

"Forgot so soon! He had right, then, the gentleman who passed us. Once take the child away—she can go

back no more. Alter Wurzel, you have been a fool, as ever—carried away by a vain chimera.”

“I hope not, father. Why should this child fall short of your expectations? Others have turned out well.” And Gretchen laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke.

“Look at her face, mein Gretchen—read well into her eyes, and answer for yourself the question; then hear the soft notes of her voice, and think to yourself as you dwell upon the future.”

“I see no evil lines, and for the rest we must trust in God. She will be subject to less temptation here than sweeping in the street.”

“You will take her, then, with the others—you have already the child in liking.”

“Yes, father.”

Then, turning to Deb—for these few sentences had been whispered apart—

“Would you like to stay with us, child?”

“Oh, do not send me away, lady; please don’t send me away. I will be so good, and try to do as you bid me.”

And from that day forward at Deb’s crossing other hands than hers manipulated the broom; and not a few of those who had given her pence wondered, when they saw a stranger, whether it was for good or evil that the little sweeper had departed. If they had seen her as she stood by the master’s side, singing with the voice of a seraph the wonderful exercises by which he trained her, would they not once more have asked the question, “Is it for good or evil that this thing has happened unto her?”

The rags have all disappeared, and Deb, in a light blue gingham, plainly made after Gretchen’s homely pattern, would scarcely be recognized by her old friends. Her fair, luxuriant, curly hair is turned off her face and rolled in a coil at the back of her head; and the large violet eyes are but seldom now cast sadly down. She is the happiest in that happy throng; and as the days and weeks roll on,

neither old Wurzel nor his daughter have had cause to regret the hour when they took Deb the sweeper from her crossing and her broom, and promoted her to a place in the Art School, as the old man loved to call the tiny house where he and his pupils dwelt. This school was old Wurzel's especial hobby. Like most geniuses, he was somewhat of a visionary; and though practical enough in intent, it would probably have failed entirely had it not been for Gretchen's care and forethought. Too poor to have carried on such a work without assistance, they were in the habit of receiving funds from wealthier art-lovers than themselves, and the arranging, expending, and accounting for these funds devolved entirely on Gretchen, who, though Anglicised by long residence in London, yet retained all the thrifty ideas of her own land, and had moreover received from her mother an early training in domestic and housewifely duties. She devoted herself to the children with maternal care; and when the hours of school were ended she would teach them by turns to cook and clean and sew with a precision and patience which were truly characteristic of her Fatherland. To blend usefulness with art-knowledge was the theory which honest Gretchen was perpetually striving to put into practice; and the fact of Deb not being able to read or write pained the good Gretchen not a little, especially as the hours devoted to learning were the most bitter in the girl's life; but "Not read and be an *artiste*—impossible—you must back to your broom, child," said somewhat sternly by old Wurzel, would arouse her slumbering energies, and for a few days the tasks would be less irksome.

Go back! No, that she never could do now. But whither in the future lay her way?

Once or twice, when she had been out with one of the other pupils—for Gretchen never allowed any of the children to be in the streets alone if she could help it—she

had passed the old crossing and stood and looked at the one-legged man who had succeeded her as sweeper; and no one who had known her in those days could have imagined that Deb, in her clean, tidy clothes, was the little ragged lass who used to solicit pence from the passers-by. It was a favourite walk of Deb's to go to the well-remembered corner, and Gretchen did not object. To keep the past well in mind was a wholesome lesson, she conjectured; so Deb and Minna Hoffmann, a tall, pleasant-spoken German girl, who had taken to little Deb, wandered by there at least twice in the week. For six weeks now Deb had been at the school. The work of civilization was going on briskly, while old Wurzel proclaimed her voice to be the finest in the house; nay, almost spoiled the girl and made her companions jealous by his flattering remarks. But Deb was very shy of having any belief in herself. She loved music for music's sake; it had not entered her mind—at all events, not yet—what effect those wondrous strains she could evoke at will would one day have on that great world of which the little street-girl understood but few of the intricacies.

"She was to sing—sing for ever—on earth—in heaven"—Wurzel had said; and, like a bird that delights in the carolling of its own sweet voice, she sang and asked no questions about the future.

"Lor' bless yer, no one ever loved me—no one belonging to me, like, I mean—never since I was ever so little. I was six—or something like it—when mother died; and she used to whack me fine—I mind that," Deb was saying, as she walked along the street with her pet companion.

"Oh, Deb, how sad! I wish you had known my mother. The angels took her just three years ago, and Miss Gretchen fetched me away to the school-home. Mother was so sweet and good! How sad not to have had a beautiful, good, kind mother like mine!"

"Well, Minna, you tell me all about her, and it will

help make up the want. Go on ; it does a lone child good to hear. I never heard anything about love and charity, and all they kind of things, till I came to the school, you know. Fancy me at school !—wouldn't some of the old uns laugh if they know'd it ! ”

“ Did you never say prayers at night, Deb, when you were little, and ask for kindness and love ? I used to kneel by mother's knee ; and when she was too ill to sit up I knelt by her bedside.”

“ And what did you pray for, Minna ? ”

“ Well, for health, strength to do right, and love to help me along.”

“ I should like to have all that—teach me to pray too.”

“ If mother were only here ! ” murmured the elder girl.

“ But she told me I must learn to do without her, and I will do my best.”

Thus almost intuitively was the humanizing process going on in Deb, and loving hearts were striving to eradicate the proclivities contracted in gutters and alleys. The seed, too, was not being cast in bad soil, for Deb's evil propensities scarcely amounted to vices ; though no one save those who have themselves worked among girls born and brought up among such surroundings as hers had been can fully recognize how utterly impossible it is ever wholly to cancel every clinging remembrance of early youth. Poor though all Herr Wurzel's pupils were, yet Deb's origin was the meanest ; and had it not been for her wonder-striking voice it is scarcely likely she would have been selected as an inmate of the school-home.

“ To-night we will make a first prayer, or you shall learn my first one,” Minna had said, after a pause ; but already Deb had forgotten the subject, and, with a little cry, rushed across the road.

“ My stars ! there you are, sir. And how ill you do look, to be sure ! ”

The gentleman who was thus addressed eyed her

curiously for some moments, as though bewildered by an unexpected and unknown apparition; then suddenly recollecting himself, "Deb!" he said. "Why, I scarcely knew you. You have grown neat and trim. What has become of the broom?"

"Throw'd it right away, sir, and I've took to my voice instead."

"Wurzel has got his way, then. I suppose you are staying at the school?"

"Yes, sir, and me and Minna are out for a walk. Minna, this is Mr. Durant—him as always gave me silver instead of coppers."

"The last half-crown I gave you you left behind," he said, laughing.

"Didn't want to be paid out of my line o' business, d'ye see, sir."

"And what is your line of business now, Deb?"

"Oh, I'se learnin'. But don't I live well, jest! And don't Miss Gretchen give me decent clothes—boots and all, without a hole!"

"Ah!" he said, sententiously. The one word "*Après*," was muttered below his breath, as though asking the question of himself.

"And this other young lady here, what does she do?" he inquired, after a moment.

"Oh, Minna just sings like the rest. She goes to Germany soon, for church choir. Shan't I be sorry to part with her!"

"And are you not going to Germany, Deb?"

"Law bless you, sir, what for? I ain't German—never could twist the words out. Besides, it's ever so far away."

"And you have so many relations to leave, little Deb."

"It ain't that, sir, but I'd get home-sick, I know I should. Fancy being all alone in furrin parts!"

"You will have to go, though, if you mean to be a singer."

"Shall I?"—and the first drop of bitterness fell in Deb's cup of bliss—"shall I? Then I almost wish I'd stuck to the broom." She, however, instantly pulled herself together. "No, I don't, for then I never should have been nothink."

"And you hope to be something now? Brava, little Deb—go on and prosper. Tell Wurzel I shall come and look you all up at the school some day soon."

"Oh, won't that be nice!" cried Deb, clapping her hands. "But bless you, sir, you walk quite limping like—what is it?"

"I broke my leg, Deb, the very day I saw you last."

"Law! and I never know'd it!"

"I sent for you to take a message for me, but you had left the crossing."

"Dear heart! I *am* sorry. If one could only know what other folks wanted and was a-going to do, how different it would be!"

"All the excitement of chance would be taken out of life," he said, bitterly; "and to disappointed lives there is nothing but excitement left."

But she did not wholly understand, so she only looked at him. She was longing to ask about Miss Wilson; but Minna was there, and he had forbidden her to speak to any one of that little episode; so she went back to the broken limb and asked how it had happened, receiving a succinct account, the causes and hidden feelings which would have made that account a full one being, however, reserved.

So Deb and Harry Durant met again; and, full of the great gentleman who always gave her silver, she went back to the Art School to talk of him to the other pupils as though he were some fairy prince who had come from his enchanted castle expressly to be worshipped.

For some days did this sort of ideal talk go on, till, in the preparation for a great gathering of all the patrons of the school, he was for a while forgotten. Once every half-year did these meetings take place, in order to test from time to time the progress made by old Wurzel's pupils. Prizes were given by the ladies and gentlemen who formed the committee; and, in accordance with foreign custom, wreaths of laurel decked the head of the *prima donna*.

It was Deb's first essay, and she was worked up to a high state of nervous excitement for many previous days. Nature, not art, was chiefly what she had to trust to, for there had as yet been scarcely any time for training; but Wurzel had bestowed of his best talents on the child whose magical voice had so attracted him.

The evening came at last; and, dressed all alike in plain blue serge frocks of Gretchen's design, the children were assembled in the music-room awaiting the arrival of the guests. Deb was pale as death—almost as shy and tremulous as on the night when she cast aside her broom for ever.

She had never been in a room with "big swells" before—only seen them roll by in their carriages—and "they made her that frightened," she said.

At last the first guests arrive and take their seats at the end of the room prepared for them. Deb watches them all with curious interest.

A grave-looking gentleman and a young girl with flashing eyes—she supposes his daughter—especially awaken her notice; and a whispered remark from Minna, "That is Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming; she is a bride," makes her look at them again and again in speechless wonder.

When some twenty people have arrived the concert begins; and, to the glowing satisfaction of old Wurzel, and amid the rapturous applause of the audience, the children sing.

Then come some instrumental and vocal solos of unequal merit, and at last it is Deb's turn. Tremblingly the first notes come out—how could she be otherwise than nervous? But gradually the power of the music, the novelty of the situation, inspire the girl as she has never been inspired before, and she throws all her soul into her voice. She is encored again and again, and awarded, without a dissentient word, the crown of laurel. It is Cicely's hand that places it on her brow as she asks the name of the flushed and gratified singer.

"Please, mem—that is, my lady—I am Deb. I swept a crossing till the master took me up."

"Which showed great discrimination on his part," struck in Sir Hubert. "You must come and sing to Lady Fleming. Will you not ask her, Cis?"

"With all my heart," cried Cicely, warmly. "We will be great friends. We neither of us have any relations, I imagine."

"Cis, you are Lady Fleming now," whispered Sir Hubert.

"Ah, yes; but I may befriend Deb, may I not?"

"Certainly, certainly, dear; do whatever pleases you—only keep your position."

Cicely gave her shoulders a little shrug, as though "the position" palled already.

"I will ask Herr Wurzel to let you come and spend a long day. You shall sing, and I will listen. Deb knows more than I do, Sir Hubert," she went on, looking mischievously at her husband. "No one in Swinton village ever taught me music."

But the love of mischief—the pleasure at having found this little singer to patronize and make a playfellow of—faded away on the instant. In the doorway stood Harry Durant. Unperceived, as he hoped, he had heard Deb's singing, and witnessed her subsequent reception by Lady Fleming. Strange are the vicissitudes of life. Accidentally,

under the quaint old German's roof, were these two destined to meet again, though an immeasurable gulf lay between them.

Cicely repressed the little cry which rose even to her throat. Had she not been reminded but now that she was Lady Fleming? But her husband noted the change of countenance.

"What is it, Cis, my darling?"

"Nothing; only there is Mr. Durant in the doorway. Ask him to come and speak to me."

He came at her bidding—"hoped Lady Fleming was quite well—had not that child a marvellous voice? and such eyes!—was glad Lady Fleming had taken to her—she was a *protégée* of his too. Would be delighted to call when he came back to town—he was leaving for a few days. The room was very hot—he must seek the outer air—he had not been quite well since his accident—must have a thorough change soon."

Yes, it was all changed; and with an icy coldness about her heart, a gasping, tearless, tightness in her throat, Cicely stood there as though spellbound, till Sir Hubert led her to the carriage; while Deb, radiant with joy over the evening's successes, envied the pretty lady who seemed to be such good friends with Mr. Durant!

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE HOME CIRCLE.

A VILLA at Campden Hill, furnished elegantly, though perhaps somewhat rigidly; servants to command; well-appointed carriages; a devoted husband—what could Cicely crave for more in life? Yet, as she stands in her fresh white dress, playing with the blind-tassel, while the sun's rays linger among her soft tresses, there is a shade upon her brow which the girlish life should not yet have known.

"I have promised to be honest and true, and I will keep my word," the young heart is murmuring to itself. "Yet I wish I had never left Swinton. I wonder if Sir Hubert would take me back there? Mr. Burke might help me to be good. Ah, no, I should not dare to tell him—I must not tell any one that dreadful secret—only Mrs. Fitzalan knew or guessed, and she said it was all nonsense. I wish it were. Shall I ever think it all nonsense, I wonder? And he looked so ill and changed!" Then she leant against the side of the open window and thought over her faded day-dream as she looked into the pretty garden, gay with the early spring flowers.

"Would your ladyship please to give some instructions about these flower-beds? Sir Hubert said I was to ask you." The gardener's rough tones broke the spell. Brushing hastily away the mist which had risen to her eyes as she leant there, Cicely walked down some steps into the garden and tried to fill her place as Lady Fleming. What did this simple village maid know of laying out flower-beds and planting gardens? And she would have laughed heartily over her ignorance and her mistakes under other auspices. But it was all wrong somehow;

and with a sort of timid gravity she ventured on a few little suggestions, simply because she did not wish to offend the gardener, caring, however, but little the while whether the flower-beds existed or no. Sir Hubert had gone into town, and Cicely had reckoned on a quiet day all to herself; and now this tiresome gardener had come to impose duties and interests on her from which she would so gladly have escaped.

The close room at the Art School on the previous evening had made her head ache, she told Sir Hubert, as an excuse for her depression and disinclination to accompany him into London; but she was not allowed to forget that she was Lady Fleming, although she was alone for a few hours. No, she could never again be Cicely the village girl.

She racked her brain to remember how the gardens were arranged at Swinton Hall, and spoke so diffidently and prettily to the great gardener, as she thought him, that he told the servants afterwards that Sir Hubert's wife was the sweetest lady he had ever seen. "But, lor', bless ye, she have caught the master's gloom."

In years gone by, when Hubert Fleming had wooed and won another and scarcely less fair a bride, he had but little understood the tactics by which a young heart may be kept fresh, joyous, and loyal. Did he comprehend the matter any better now that his hair was besprinkled with grey—his own heart seared by disappointment and fret? Scarcely. Luxury, refinement, state, Cicely had in abundance—love, too, as Sir Hubert knew how to lavish it in undemonstrative attentions. Still the void was not filled; and as far as he was concerned duty, with its cold, calculating preciseness, must ever take the place of heartiness and spontaneous affection. As the gardener had defined it, the whole household seemed impressed by "the master's gloom."

The subject of the flower-beds being at last finally despatched, Cicely wanders off through the miniature

grounds into a tiny shrubbery which had been planted at the back of the house. There she sits for awhile and resumes her dream. A listlessness and languor seem to have crept over her since last night, for which she would not dare to account; but she does not ask herself the reason—only sits on there and gives way to the painful pleasure of dwelling on the theme the wicked fairies who are at that moment presiding over her destiny suggest to her. There seems no beginning and no end to the story Cicely is spinning out of her imagination, and of which she herself is the heroine, although she scarcely wishes to recognize the fact. It has no strong passions to define its outlines, but is merely a girlish romance over what might have been, and a kind of poetical longing that life may glide away noiselessly like some liquid stream, and that unobserved and calmly she may dwell on there, undisturbed by storm and tempest till rest comes. She does not want joys or society or finery—only to be kind to Sir Hubert and affectionate to him after her own fashion; and this she will carry out so much more readily if left peacefully in her pretty villa. Paris and Mrs. Fitzalan, of all places and people, she hopes never to see again.

“Cis, dearest, it is too early in the year to be sitting out-of-doors without a hat.”

Sir Hubert had come back, and as one guilty Cicely sprang up to meet him. He took her hand—it was as cold as ice.

“See, I have brought an old friend to dine with us.” And perhaps the first flush of real pleasure she had felt that day came over her as she saw Algy Duncombe’s boyish face and welcomed him cordially to her new home.

“I don’t know what sort of fare our little *châtelaine* has provided,” said Sir Hubert, striving to be gay, as he frequently did now. “They are early days to test her housewifely powers.”

“Oh, Mr. Duncombe is nobody; he will have to take

what he can get and be thankful," she answered, casting off her past depression, with a laugh.

"Thank you, Lady Fleming. Let me always be nobody—there is scarcely a pleasanter position to fill in the house of people one likes."

"That is right, Cis. I always calculated on a brotherly and sisterly understanding between you and Algy."

"I never had a brother—will you fill the vacant place?" she answered, with a little serio-comic air, making a mock curtsy to him.

"With all my heart—claiming all the privileges and all the duties."

"Take care, take care, Algy, what you are committing yourself to. The little lady there is somewhat *exigeante* in her requirements."

"Oh, Sir Hubert!" cried Cicely; but Algy interrupted her.

"I have no fear in pledging myself to perform all the brotherly functions Lady Fleming shall impose upon me, and only hope they may be onerous."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. Duncombe, because I cannot want you to be more than a playfellow, unless circumstances should render me very unhappy."

"My darling!" whispered Sir Hubert, under his breath, as he pressed the little hand which during their walk to the house she had placed upon his arm.

"Playfellows! Hurrah! that is just the word," shouted buoyant Algy, who, though dashed in his hopes of a speedy union with May, yet never lost heart or turned sulky with fate. "And, by way of beginning the play, Fleming and I have been concocting some fun as we drove down here. But I'll leave him to tell his own tale."

"Well, Cis, dear, we have been arranging that you shall give a party. My little wife must not get moped; she must have friends, and go about and amuse herself."

Lady Fleming turned very white.

"It is very good of you, Sir Hubert ; but please I would much rather be quiet—I don't want to know a number of people. They will only frighten me. I am quite contented, thank you."

She did not say happy—only contented. Both the men looked at each other in astonishment.

"But, Cis, dear, all girls like a little fun ; and you are only a girl, though you are my wife."

"All girls—yes, but I am not like other girls, I suppose. Besides, remember I was not brought up in your world. I am quite content to be alone with you and have Mr. Duncombe for a brother."

"By Jove! can she love him after all?" was Algy's mental query. "Poor little Cis! And I thought to do her a good turn by making a move towards getting her out of this moping existence. Well, I suppose it is a mistake to interfere between man and wife."

But though Algy Duncombe had had some difficulty in persuading Sir Hubert that his wife ought to take her place in society, once having opened his eyes Cicely would find it no easy matter to close them again ; in fact, the more determined she seemed to be to escape from the trammels of society and the world, the more resolute he was to impose them on her. Algy had suggested that she would die of suppressed youth, if she were kept boxed up with an old fellow like him, and not taken about and amused ; and this thought once alive, Sir Hubert would not rest till he had done his duty by Cicely, or what he and Algy in their mannish wisdom regarded as duty.

"Give a garden party here? Oh, Sir Hubert, I don't know any one, and there is no one to help me."

"Why, Lady Fleming, I saw piles of cards as I came through the drawing-room just now. To judge from your card-plate your acquaintance is scarcely a small one."

"Oh, they are all Sir Hubert's friends, not mine." And the tears came into Cicely's eyes at the idea of receiving as hostess all these strange people.

"Nonsense, Cis; my friends are your friends now. This objection is childish."

Cis bit her lip and repressed her tears at this almost the first reproof she had received.

"Is it my duty to entertain all these people?" The question was addressed to Algy.

"Catechism says it is your duty to fill your place 'in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call you,'" he answered, with his usual flippant levity.

"Then send out the invitations, please, Sir Hubert, and I will do my best."

But here arose a fresh difficulty—none of the trio were adepts in the art of party-giving. "Without some lady trained in the ways of fashionable life the whole thing would be an utter *fiasco*," Algy said; "wrong amalgamations would take place—divorced people be asked to meet each other; the most horrible complications would arise; in fact, Lady Fleming's first reception would be a thing to be remembered with horror."

But, while he and Cicely laughed heartily at these supposititious failures and absurdities, which he sketched with a light hand, Sir Hubert was pondering over what he considered the gravity of the situation. It appeared to him that having brought his young wife to London without providing her with any feminine guide to whom she could appeal for counsel and direction, was a gross neglect on his part, and he was thinking whom of his numerous acquaintance he would select for the purpose, while the two young people were amusing themselves over the fun they managed to elicit from the ridiculous side of the picture.

"Lady Susan Verulam!" said Sir Hubert, speaking at last, after a long silence.

Algy gave a protracted whistle.

"To what end do I hear the mention of that name?" he asked, jauntily.

"She will put us right about the invitations—she knows everybody."

"Just so—but does everybody know her?"

"What do you mean, Algy? She is my first cousin."

"*À la bonne heure!* old fellow, and a very jolly party too. Few people one can spend a pleasanter half-hour with than with good-tempered Lady Sue."

"She is *the* very person; I will write to her to-night."

"So be it. Your cousin is, of course, the right individual to introduce her ladyship here—only——"

"Only what, Algy? None of your horrid, unbelieving tone—it is so demoralizing. You have always got a *canard* about every woman. I am sure Lady Susan is most kind-hearted and excellent. I have known her since she was a child."

"The jolliest of the jolly, I repeat. Well, perhaps I have a nasty habit of knowing too much."

"And what do you know of Lady Susan? Out with it."

Algy looked perplexed.

"Upon my soul, I can't exactly say—nothing specially—it does not do to repeat all one hears; as you say they may be only *canards*; but would not an older and staidier person be a better *chaperon*, if one may be permitted the word?"

"Decidedly not. Cicely wants young people about her, not old ones. Besides, Lady Susan is nearly thirty. It is one of your prejudices, Algy. There are so few women you can tolerate, that little Cis ought to feel quite flattered at being an exception. While waiting for dinner I will just write a line to Lady Susan and ask her to drive over and lunch here to-morrow."

Algy shrugged his shoulders as Sir Hubert walked away.

"Obstinate as a mule. How odd it is that some people will not see!"

"Tell me about Lady Susan. What is your objection to her?" asked Cicely.

"Oh, she is a noisy, jolly woman—very good company; all the men like her and the women hate her. Her own parties are amusing enough—a certain amount of Belgravia with a strong element of Bohemia, to make them highly flavoured. Strange that Fleming don't see that is it not at all the thing to be wished for here."

Cicely looked at him vacantly. Belgravia and Bohemia—the words were as Greek to her. She only said—

"If Sir Hubert wishes me to like Lady Susan, of course I must try to do so."

"Oh, like her—you are sure enough to like her. She is immense fun."

"Then why do you say women hate her?"

"Women of the world, I mean," said Algy, laughing. "Women with whom she interferes, and who do not belong to her set—many of them are envious, because she is a favourite with the sterner sex."

"Oh, Mr. Duncombe, I do not believe all this. As Sir Hubert says, you are too partial in your opinions."

"Not a bit of it. You have much to learn, my dear sister; in fact, you will get lost in a labyrinth of knowledge ere long. Then you will be glad enough if I will help you through."

"What a miserable thing life is!" said Cicely, drearily. "If Sir Hubert would only let me float through it without getting into the turmoil!"

"Impossible—you have not begun to be jolly yet. You will enjoy the fun when once you get into the thick of it. How did you like the Art School last night? So like Fleming to drag you off there."

"Oh, I liked it so much. There was a girl with a marvellous voice—Deb they called her. She *was* a street-girl. She is coming down here to sing to me some day soon."

"Another of Fleming's crotchets. Don't let him fill the house with waifs and strays who are supposed to have genius hidden somewhere under their hair—he will if you let him."

"I want this girl to come so much. She has such lovely eyes! And you know it is just a little bit dull here sometimes, Mr. Duncombe."

"Lady Susan Verulam and a street-girl—well, you are beginning your London acquaintance oddly enough, Lady Fleming. Where will it end?" cried cheery Algy, laughing heartily at the amalgamations his mind's eye saw in the future.

If he could really have raised the veil perhaps the picture which lay revealed might have sobered him.

As it was, he made merry over things as they appeared on the surface—accepted as a joke Lady Susan's interference in the party-giving project; suggested several people he thought should be invited, and went back to town radiant at the new relationship he had contracted, and still more at the hope that Lady Fleming would prove a reliable coadjutrix in helping him to baffle Mrs. Bertrand and gain more frequent interviews with May than he had hitherto obtained since he left Paris.

And as Cicely took out her pins and unfastened her hooks that night—for she was not yet fine lady enough to allow the maid to undress her—conflicting were the thoughts which chased each other rapidly through her brain. Girlhood was not so utterly dead within her but that she regarded favourably these glimpses into a cheery, pleasant land which had been opened out for her to-night. Yet an undefinable sense of depression hung over her and made her dread—she scarcely knew what; but that her life could never be all fun and merriment she felt very sure, whatever Algy Duncombe might say to the contrary.

CHAPTER XXI.

INTO THE WILDS.

“‘BABETTE, dépêche-toi, petite fille.’ The *dame Anglaise* is waiting for her *déjeuner*. Twelve o’clock, and she has not touched food this blessed day. Poor lady! it would be something to know the history she has brought with her from other parts. Oh, *le monde, le monde*, how thankful we ought to be not to leave our village!”

“Well for you, *Mère Françoise*, who saw Paris when you were young; but *nous autres*—we have seen nothing.”

“Thank *le bon Dieu*, Babette. There is nothing but wickedness in the world, *ma biche*.”

“*Tiens!* though. It is pleasant, this wickedness, sometimes. If the good lady would only take me back with her I would serve her *sans gages*.”

“*La Sainte Vierge* forbid. Never shall you go to that wicked Paris while the old *grand-mère* lives.”

“*Dites donc, Mère Françoise*, what *méchanceté* did you commit in Paris, that you are so afraid of it for me?” And Babette sat down at the old woman’s feet.

“*Du tout, du tout*, Babette. Get up at once; the *dame Anglaise*, I tell you, is waiting for her breakfast.”

It is a small *auberge*, in an unfrequented village, in the beautiful country of the Limagne, where this conversation is going on, one midday in early spring. The snow still tips the distant hills—mountains the aborigines style them—but the vegetation of the plains is opening into life, springing up on all sides with a fecundity and beauty unknown in most other parts of France. The dew-besprinkled grass and the early flowers, covered with diamonds from recent rain, are glistening in the rays of the sun; while *Mère Françoise*’s well-kept cows are basking in

the expanding brightness. From amidst heavy clouds which hang over the mountains the sun has burst smiling forth, revealing numberless fantastic pictures which, formed by the mingling of snow and cloud, adorn the distant heights, giving a vastness and a grandeur to the landscape which is in striking contrast with the smiling luxuriance of the plains. Beautiful Auvergne ! poets have sung of its beauties ; painters have immortalized them on canvas ; yet the theme is inexhaustible, so varied is the changing aspect of one of Nature's fairest gardens. In this Eden-land there is no conflicting social element to jar. It is as dissimilar to Paris and its ways as the *blasé* time-worn traveller could wish. Here, "the world forgetting, of the world forgot," he may linger in peace—if peace be in his heart—and, communing alone with Nature's God, acknowledge to the fullest the omnipotent hand which has formed beauty out of chaos.

The *dame Anglaise* who, fleeing from the haunts of men, has sought refuge amid these sylvan scenes is Mrs. Fitzalan.

Fierce passions had been roused within her by that last interview with Harry Durant. The past, that for years she had sought to live down, and had hoped would slumber tranquilly till the end came, had been awakened ruthlessly. In flight only could she save herself—from what ? Ah, that, perchance, she dared not answer ; but she had left it all, and, with no enemy to face save the surgings of her own wild-beating heart, she had wandered forth, without even Victorine for a companion into these wilds. To climb the mountains and spend hours in their vast solitudes had been her object ; but the spring was not yet sufficiently advanced ; she must wait till the snows had melted, the ordinary means of transit had begun. "Wait in that poor *auberge*, with no companions but Mère Françoise and Babette, and such a fund of old memories crowding about her brain : would human reason bear the test ? " But she

would not return. She had thrown up her hand and left her partners in the game of life to play out the cards as best they could. Let them be for a time at least ; later on it would be soon enough to inquire who had won or lost, for they were but shuffled as yet, these chance-cards which Mrs. Fitzalan had thrown on the baize so spitefully.

She has been out since early morning, wandering among the mist and damp. What cared she for weather ? To forget the past was all she asked ; to kill the cankerworm within her only prayer. If storm and rain could effect that, then let them be welcome. At all events she must wander ever on, for rest was impossible. Yet whither, and to what end ? Life could bring no hope. Poor Cicely ! Did she never think of the future she had carved for her out of a joyous happy present ; did no remorse pursue her for the wrongs inflicted on that helpless, dependent child ? Hardened by disappointment, herself the victim, as she believed, of an adverse fate, what did Mrs. Fitzalan care for the troubles of others ? As she walked rapidly through the stream-intersected country in which she had chosen to isolate herself, plunging recklessly into the tiny rivulets which abounded, and holding her dripping garments closely round her, what heeded she the amount of misery or happiness that existed ? "*Ego*" was her only thought ; revenge her only aim ; but what could she do ? She had fired the train ; the gunpowder must blaze forth in time—and then !

Such was something of the mood in which she reached Mère Françoise's *auberge* and proceeded to change her wet skirts while the *omelette aux choux* was being cooked, and Babette was with dilatoriness collecting the plates and knives. Mrs. Fitzalan, the worshipped idol of Parisian flatterers ! Could they but see her in this new life, shorn of external seemliness, picturing to herself reality as it stares before her in the grim shades of failure and despair ! Like a phantom from which there is no escape terror has

driven her forth into these solitary wilds, and is ever about her, engrafted on her life-tree, a very portion of that *Ego* she so dearly loves. A madness and a dread had come over her, and she had fled from Paris, leaving no word, no sign; thus if she were calumniated and vilified she would not know it. Henceforth the mountains should be her home; she would make her portion with the honest peasants who dwelt there till—well, sooner or later she would learn the issue of events! She had taken sufficient money to last some months with economy; and for the future? Death might ensue, or chance would come to the rescue. The very day of that last interview with Mr. Durant she had taken her unpremeditated departure; and when he returned on the morrow, to see if she would not reasonably discuss with him their relative positions, she was gone—escaped from his clutches for a while. She had had her revenge, while he was baulked. But Harry Durant's spirit had been cowed, not roused by past events; long confinement to his bed had weakened him physically; disappointment and annoyance had crushed somewhat his mental power.

“Let her go—remorse will bring its own punishment—to be alone with her thoughts will be a severer ordeal than any I could propose,” had been his prompt decision, and he told the servants to make no alteration in their usual routine till their mistress returned—as return he felt sure she would. He took no steps to interfere with her reception when that event should occur, and himself went off at once to England, to try, as many others have done before, whether he had a facile capability to forget. Had he known how Mrs. Fitzalan was wandering like Hagar in the wilds, the knowledge might have afforded him even in those sad hours a secret pleasure. He took up his paint-brushes and his easel, unpacked his picture-cases, and set up his studio as a rendezvous for *artistes* and *virtuosi*. Harry Durant had too much money really to want work,

but he must play at being poor to kill time. He had travelled about the earth of late years till fresh scenes palled on him. No, he would try the settling down process for a while—make London his home and, himself aloof, keep watch over Cicely.

He had scarcely anticipated meeting her so soon, as he carefully avoided the houses where Sir Hubert would be likely to introduce her. How could he imagine that, her honeymoon hardly waned, she would come out in the new character of an art-patron? He had forgotten or passed unheeded the fact that Sir Hubert's refined, scholarly, and artistic proclivities led him wherever talent and taste found a resting-place, and that to carry on the education Mr. Burke had so ably begun would be his chief interest now, and induce him to take Cicely wherever knowledge was to be gained or cultivation increased. This had been Sir Hubert's plan of life till Algy came and told him she would mope and die if she were shut up like a linnet in a gilded cage—she must have light and fun, like other young things. A husband who played the schoolmaster would wake one fine morning to find himself regarded as "a bore."

All this and much more lecturing Sir Hubert had received from Algy on their way to Campden Hill on the day succeeding the school *soirée*. Perhaps Algy's wild talk would scarcely have hit the mark so readily but that Sir Hubert had noted the girl's haggard, jaded look, which he now with Algy's assistance gladly ascribed to the want of youth's natural amusements. How could they either of them know that Harry Durant had aught to do with Cicely's listlessness?

And he, as he sat in his chamber and smoked pipe after pipe far on into the small hours of morning, had he remarked her start when she saw him, the enforced quietness, so unlike her usual manner, as he talked with her? Ay had he, and a perfect hailstorm of maledictions fell from his lips on the wretched woman who, alone in the Auvergne

solitudes, was expiating in a sort of temporary madness some portion of her guilt.

"Should he go away? He had told Cicely a change was necessary for his health's sake, but he felt very disinclined to move; a sort of fascination seemed to keep him on in London. Why should he be hunted from pillar to post throughout the world, because forsooth she had chosen to become Lady Fleming? He had battled through a good many storms during a life tolerably fraught with adventure, and surmounted them—was he going to be crushed and made miserable now by a girl who had not sufficient love for him to remain free for his sake? No, he would assert his manliness, and let her see that it was a matter of the most perfect indifference to him whether she became Lady Fleming or not."

So for a whole week he worked vigorously at his easel—only going to his club for dinner, and then playing at high stakes till the closing hour. Harry Durant, who seldom touched a card save to cut occasionally into a rubber when he was wanted, was, to the astonishment of his set, becoming all on a sudden one of the most determined whist-players in London.

"What does it mean?" asked one of his friends.

"Mean, my dear fellow? Why, that I can't take much exercise with a weak leg. I have been studying whist while I was shut up in those horrid lodgings. A man must do something."

"Yes, but a man does not play high by way of mere occupation."

"Occupation without excitement—no, that I could not stand—time goes slowly enough as it is."

"Ah, Durant, I am afraid you are in a bad way since that illness of yours."

"I shall get over it, old man, I make no doubt; only, you see, I must cure myself my own way. You gamble—why should you object to my following in your wake?"

"But then I always played. I am only expressing surprise at your sudden conversion to the green table; you used to prefer the society of women."

Harry Durant laughed.

"Have you not yet known me long enough or well enough to discover that I do everything in life by fits and starts? Cards have got their day just now—the women have had theirs."

His companion shook his head, as though he thought it a bad business.

"Come with me abroad—I am thinking of going off next week—I can't stand London in the season."

"To play picquet in the *cercle* in Paris—where is the difference? No, thank you; I have had enough of the French capital to last for some time."

"Oh, we won't go to Paris—but we might try Monaco. By-the-by, did you ever fall in with a certain Mrs. Fitzalan in Paris?"

"Rather," was the short reply.

"Is she as handsome and all that sort of thing as people say?"

"A good-looking devil—is that what you mean?"

"Shown you the cloven foot, has she, eh, Durant? They say she has skedaddled. Who is the hero—do you know?"

"I know nothing whatever of Mrs. Fitzalan's concerns, nor do I wish to," was the testy reply; and Mr. Durant turned away.

"Green tables *versus* womankind—here is the explanation," muttered the other to himself as he marked the furrows on Harry's open brow; and, perfectly satisfied at his own reading of the riddle, would probably start it in half a dozen sources on the morrow as the latest club gossip. Like many others of his species, he merely skimmed the surface and was content. A letter given to Mr. Durant at that moment by Algy Duncombe, who had just come in,

this searcher for information passed unobserved by, and yet it contained the essence of what he had been labouring for the last half-hour to find out. It merely announced that Lady Fleming would be "at home" on Tuesday, June 5. The invitation was stiff enough, and would probably have found its way into the waste-paper basket, had not "Please come.—C. F.," written in the corner in a girlish hand heightened his pulse and fired the warm blood circling about his heart

CHAPTER XXII.

A GARDEN PARTY.

A VICTORIA of the newest shape, with a pair of fast-going cobs, is dashing rapidly down the road in the direction of Campden Hill. Cicely's newly-appointed "feminine director," seated side by side with a fair man of the especial London club type, is laughing joyously, as though life for her knew no storms. On the surface of rippling streams Lady Susan Verulam continually floats in an atmosphere of perpetual sunshine. Fun and jollity are the only attributes she ever seeks among her surroundings. Flirtations amuse her—love would bore her; so she never gets into any serious scrapes. Married at nineteen to a city millionaire, she enjoys to the fullest the good things the gods have sent her; is civil to her husband when she sees him, which is not often; nay, even flirts with him if they happen to indulge in an infrequent *tête-à-tête*; while he, engrossed in his city life, his men's dinners, and his Sundays to look after things down at their place in B——shire, tells every one he has the jolliest, most charming wife in England, and is perfectly happy. Toilettes and dangles Lady Susan has in abundance. But Mr. Verulam's purse-strings are

elastic, thus the first are paid for without difficulty; and as she was never known in her life to indulge in a *grande passion*, there is not much harm to be got out of the latter. This was the woman Sir Hubert, with his manly acumen, had chosen as a companion for his wife. He only saw that she was merry and worldly-wise; while Cicely was moped and wanted to be taught the ways of London society. Opposites must be surely the extremes which would effect the *juste milieu* he desired to attain; and Lady Susan was nothing loth to patronize—it was the very thing which would give her *prestige*; so she folded the bride affectionately in her arms, promised her no end of assistance and amusement, entered *con amore* into the spirit of the garden party, took Cicely's breath away by her glib-tongued gossip, and stormed her heart by her overpowering protestations of devotion. It was like a fresh language to Cicely as she listened to her new cousin's never-ending list of *canards* and scandals about people Lady Fleming had never yet seen, but to whom she was to be introduced at her own party.

“And you will have to recollect all the *historiettes*, my dear Cis, or you will make no end of mistakes. However, I shall be there to prompt you, so you will not come to much grief,” she continued as she saw Lady Fleming's woebegone countenance.

She is on her way to play prompter even now, as she rolls swiftly through Kensington with Lord George Burke, her *attaché pro tem*. Of course they are the first to arrive at the pretty villa, which by means of flowers and bits of well-distributed colour has been turned into a fairy palace under Lady Susan's supervision. The young *châtelaine*, in a soft white satin dress of Worth's especial *façon*, is standing in trembling expectation by the side of her sombre-looking spouse when Lady Susan, rustling in pale blue silk and bristling over with importance, enters on the scene.

“I am very glad you have come, Susan, for the little lady here is growing very nervous.”

"Pooh, nonsense, Cis—you must learn to take life as you find it. We mean to have some good fun to-day, don't we, Lord George? By the way—what a breach of good manners!—I have not introduced you. I suppose I thought every one who knew me knew you."

Lord George shook the hand held out to him by his hostess, for whom he declared at once. Cicely had a way of winning men with a glance—probably because it was a matter of indifference to her whether they liked her or not.

"Everything looks charming," went on rattling Lady Susan, "except Hubert; and if he is going to play death's head at his own *fête* I'll have him shut up in a top room or send him into the City, to join Mr. Verulam."

"I am all right—never felt more lively in my life," said Sir Hubert, smiling.

The truth is he was uncommonly nervous over this plunge he was making back into old scenes on Cicely's account, and he tried to hide it by assuming a dignified composure, which only served to give him a sort of undertaker air excessively displeasing to Lady Sue.

"Well, people will begin to arrive soon, no doubt," she went on. "Remember, Cis, you are not to think of introducing any one (as if Cis would have dared), and stop near me at first, so as to get the cue for pretty speeches—then we shall do all right. What a joke this is!—just like private theatricals before the curtain goes up. Dear me, there is one thing we have omitted, and something very important too."

"What is that?" asked Sir Hubert, anxiously.

"We have not got even the faintest approach at royalty to stick up and worship at the end of the lawn; and a party of any sort nowadays without a bit of royalty is a very small thing."

"This will be the blessed exception," said Lord George, laughing, partly at the joke, but chiefly at Cicely's puzzled

face. She was not yet sufficiently *au fait* in her new world to appreciate Lady Susan's somewhat satirical chaff.

In quick succession the carriages began to set down the expected guests, and Cicely did not find the position of hostess half as formidable as she had expected. Algy Duncombe had arrived and was sharing with Lady Susan the onerous duties of entertaining, keeping up between them as they did so a running fire of repartee, putting every one at their ease, and starting them off amid laughter down into the garden, on which, fortunately for the success of the whole concern, the sun was shining brightly and warmly, though the summer was yet young. Sir Hubert had found several old friends; and knowing that his wife was in good hands, he too had wandered into the grounds for some pleasant chat.

Three times Lord George had sought to lure Lady Sue away from her post at the door, but with all her careless levity she was not devoid of loyalty. She would not desert Cicely till the last guest had arrived, though Algy had long since fluttered away in the Bertrands' train. For, strange to relate, Mrs. Bertrand had actually condescended to grace Cicely's party with her presence. But what inconsistency will not a match-making mother with two marriageable daughters commit in order to get one more occasion of exhibiting them in public? Lady Susan has, however, at last acceded to Lord George's request that she will come and have a saunter in the grounds, and Cicely is left talking to a group of people to whom policy suggests that they should make themselves agreeable to this young beauty, who is not unlikely to become one of Fashion's rulers. Cicely has cast off a good deal of her shyness; everything has gone smoothly, there is no cause for anxiety, but still for all that she feels a want. All the invited guests have not come; in fact, the only one she cared to see is absent. She lingers in the drawing-room talking, instead of joining the crowd on the lawn. Is it so

wholly impossible that he may arrive yet, or is that first friend Cicely ever had in the world suddenly turned into an enemy and going to shun her in the future? The sudden thought brings a gulp into her throat even as she stands there laughing pleasantly.

No, she has prejudged him; for there is Harry Durant in *propria persona* coming in at the door.

Young hearts untutored in the world's schooling are apt to be expansive. Cicely flushed up to the roots of her hair, and with an exclamation of delight rushed forward to meet him. Those around smiled and wondered what the lien was between them.

"I was so afraid you did not mean to come; and my first party without you could not have been a success," she said, warmly.

He looked into her eyes as he gently pressed her extended hand.

"Thank God I have been mistaken—it is all well with her," he thought. "She does not care for me."

Harry Durant, like many others of his brethren, failed to read the signs aright.

"I am glad not to have disappointed you," he said, cheerily. "Where is Fleming?"

"Oh, in the garden somewhere. But I want so much to talk to you, Mr. Durant. I never heard of your accident till after I came to London. Why did you not write, or get some one to write? It was too unkind of you."

"The letter must have miscarried. French posts, perhaps, are not so reliable as English ones, Lady Fleming."

"You did write, then? Ah, I wish I had known. But why do you call me Lady Fleming?"

"Is it not your name?"

"Well, yes—but to you I was always Cis. Does being married take all one's friends away?"

"Certainly not—most people find that it increases their number. A home to receive in, a fortune to spend, usually

multiply the insects who are ever ready to fatten on and sting the hand that tenders benefits."

"How bitter you are to-day!" said Cicely, gravely. "Are you angry with me?"

"My dear Lady Fleming, could I so presume, by what right should I be angry with you?"

"By that of old friendship, I suppose. Though we have not known each other long," she went on, dreamily. "This time last year I was running about Swinton woods, and had never seen you."

"Now you are Lady Fleming—the happiest of the happy—the envied possessor of wealth and position. That is the other side of the picture, I think, is it not?"

"No, emphatically no. I would give all, everything I have in the world, to be back at Swinton as I was last year."

"Cicely—Lady Fleming—what does this mean? Do you not know that to turn back when once you have started on life's highway is impossible?"

"Yes, I know it well," she answered, looking at him through the mist which hung over her eyes; "and I have sworn to be honest and true. I will keep my word."

"Amen!" was half-muttered through his thick beard; but she heard it nevertheless, and there was a short silence. Every one had left the drawing-room—they were quite alone. *Tête-à-têtes* had grown dangerous between these two—perhaps they both recognized the unavowed fact; and Harry Durant was already beginning to fear he had formed too hastily his judgment on symptoms.

"I had a letter from Burke the other day—he asks about you," he said at last, seeking to break the awkward pause by a more or less commonplace remark.

"Mr. Burke! Ah, how much I should like to see him! Please say all sorts of kind things to him from me. He never wrote to congratulate me when I married—I wonder why? Did no one think it was a subject for congratulation, Mr. Durant? Yet Sir Hubert is very kind."

"Had you been the most intriguing young lady in Europe you could scarcely have done better," was the somewhat bitter answer; then hurriedly, as he noted Cicely's pained expression, "Fleming is *au fond* a most amiable, good fellow. It will be entirely your own fault if you do not get on well with him."

"And who says I do not get on?" asked Cicely, a little piqued. "I should not have married him if I had not meant to behave properly."

"Of course not." And Mr. Durant bowed his head as he made a slight move towards the garden.

Cicely and he passed down the steps together.

"Have you heard anything of Mrs. Fitzalan?" she asked. He stopped at once and turned abruptly round.

"Was she kind to you, Cicely? Or did she force you to do things against your will?"

"Force me!" answered Cicely, who scarcely liked his tone. "Do you think I am such a baby as to be a mere plaything in Mrs. Fitzalan's hands?"

"It is well—as long as you were allowed to exercise free will I have no fault to find."

"If those who might have influenced me kept aloof, naturally I listened to Mrs. Fitzalan," she said, more meekly.

"Just so; and having no principle herself, she did not think it necessary in other people."

"Mr. Durant, how can you talk like that? You are horribly disagreeable to-day. There is Rose Bertrand—perhaps you will find her society more pleasant than mine."

Thus dismissed, Mr. Durant passed on from the foot of the steps where they had been lingering and joined, not his cousins, but other acquaintances; while Cicely did her little best as hostess, feeling wearied and heart-sick the while. How gladly would she have gone upstairs and indulged in a good cry in the solitude of her own room!

But she must not give way—the comedietta in which she was elected to take a leading part must be played out to the end. On the whole she was acquitting herself most creditably; though, when she received an occasional word of praise and encouragement from Sir Hubert or Lady Susan as she passed them, they neither of them could form the faintest conjecture of how difficult was the struggle for outward appearances which the young bride was making with herself. Once again *they* met and spoke in the throng, but this time gay Lady Susan led the conversation, and from her heart Cicely thanked her, as she listened to her lively banter, and heard Harry Durant reply in the pleasant tone which was more identified with himself than the bitter one he had chosen to use to Cicely.

“Well, Cis, it is nearly over, and it has been a success. But, child, you look as pale as ashes; I am afraid you are tired to death.” And Lady Susan turned to Cicely, after a last little shot fired at Harry Durant. “Get her a glass of wine, there is a good man.”

“No, thank you; really I do not want it. I am not ill, only naturally nervous, I suppose.”

“Will you not at least sit down, Lady Fleming? You have been standing about for hours.”

She took the chair Harry Durant offered her, but did not trust herself to thank him. His measured tones, whenever he addressed her, were almost more than she could bear. Nearly every one had gone, save intimates, and Sir Hubert and Algy came up at this moment.

“Why, Durant, I have scarcely had a word with you. Stop to dinner and tell us all about your accident. Cis has been wondering several times how it could have happened.” And Sir Hubert laid his hand familiarly on his old friend’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Fleming, but I am afraid I must get back to town.”

“Nonsense; I won’t take no, for I don’t believe you

have an engagement. Here, Cis, persuade Durant to stop—you have more influence than I have.”

“I shall be very glad Mr. Durant, if you will,” she said simply.

“Yes, I will drive you back. I have got my phaeton here, and I am going to stay,” chimed in Algy Duncombe.

“There, that is settled.” And Sir Hubert, taking it for granted, though Harry Durant had not spoken, walked across to thank Lady Susan for her assistance and express his regrets that her engagements in town prevented her from staying for the evening.

“Shall I go, or stay?” asked Durant, leaning over the back of Cicely’s chair.

“Stay,” she said, “of course. I wonder you can ask such a question.” And again he was baffled as to whether she cared for him or not, so thoroughly off-hand was the merely hostess-like answer she contrived to give him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE QUICKSANDS.

BACK to London, to dress hastily, eat a *tête-à-tête* dinner with Mr. Verulam, and then go off to three parties, each more crowded than the other—such was the life *au grand galop* in which Lady Sue’s days and nights were passed. No wonder she was *au fait* at all the little stories which floated about on the surface of town-talk. To-night she is a sort of heroine, for has she not been the favoured individual selected to launch Lady Fleming, and is not Lady Fleming, although she knows it not, the one subject of Society’s conversation just now?

“Who is she? Where did Fleming pick her up?” are

queries which assail Lady Susan as she appears in each drawing-room in succession.

"She is so charming, I am quite in love with her; so I don't know what the men must be," she is saying to an inquisitive old dowager, who, not having been included in the number of Cicely's guests, is more curious than the rest.

"It is positively sickening," chimed in Mrs. Bertrand, "especially when I can remember her a dirty brat making mud-pies in our lanes."

"Oh, Mrs. Bertrand, you know her, then?" And the general attention is at once transferred from Lady Sue, who in all loyalty to her cousin and his wife vouchsafes no information, to Mrs. Bertrand, who is spitefully anxious to be cross-examined.

"Know her? Yes, of course. Her old grandfather was our lodge-keeper."

"But you were at her party to-day." It was Lady Susan's voice speaking through a chorus of "Oh's!" "I wonder you went; in fact, I wonder you go to any one who is not in the stud-book. For my part, I don't mind. Mr. Verulam's father was a tanner, but it does not make my diamonds glisten less brightly or my clothes smell of hides." And Lady Sue finished her sentence with a gay laugh, in which all the little circle of talkers joined, except Mrs. Bertrand, who said, gravely—

"I am—I own it—a stickler for old forms. I hate the levelling system of the present day, by which every milk-maid and every drayman can get into Society, if they have only money enough to pay their way."

"Stuff about old forms!" cried Lady Sue. "Since King Cophetua married the beggar-maid, beauty has had the power of turning street-girls into peeresses; and a very good thing, too. I repeat that Lady Fleming is perfectly charming, and I throw the gauntlet down to any one who chooses to dispute the fact with me."

"Brava, Lady Susan!" Of course the ejaculation came from a man. But Mrs. Bertrand was not to be so easily thwarted. She looked carefully round to see that her doves were out of hearing; then, dropping her voice, she said, mysteriously—

"It might perhaps be as well if Lady Susan Verulam were to inquire more carefully into the antecedents of the people on whom she bestows her patronage."

"Ah, Mrs. Bertrand, you know all about it. Do let us have it," said the dowager aforesaid; and the little knot of people drew more closely round; while Lady Susan's face assumed a half-defiant, half-amused expression.

"I believe we are all friends here. I would not otherwise ask these questions for the world. But the lady with whom this girl was living in Paris, who is she? The relations my nephew, Mr. Durant, bears to her, what are they?"

It was evident that Mr. Durant had cooled somewhat of late in those attentions to Rose which she had once thought so promising.

"What a wicked woman you must be to say such things! that is, unless you can thoroughly substantiate them," burst out Lady Susan.

"I have said nothing—I only asked two questions. Can you answer them?"

"As for the lady in Paris, I know nothing about her. Lady Fleming was with her a very short time, and does not seem to have cared much for her. And relations between her and Mr. Durant simply do not exist. He is an old friend of Sir Hubert's, and stayed to dine there to-night."

Incautious Lady Sue! in your honest open-heartedness you are no match for Mrs. Bertrand, ever on the look-out for information to feed her spite.

"Harry Durant dining at the Flemings'! Well, I should not have believed Sir Hubert to be such a fool. He

has been deceived once ; I wonder it did not teach him wariness."

There was a general titter. How delighted every one was to get even the vaguest suggestion from which a good story might be circulated against the bride ! everybody but Lady Susan, who was really angry, and "longed to horse-whip that good-for-nothing, malicious woman." She had recovered her prudence, however, since her last speech, for she laughed gaily as she said :—

"What absurd ideas people will take in their heads ! Why, Cicely and Mr. Durant are on the most distant terms, while she is over head and ears in love with her husband."

Sir Hubert had not been so thoroughly wanting in acumen when he selected Lady Susan as a friend for his wife, though he little guessed how necessary a worldly-wise woman would be to Cicely in the vicissitudes through which she was about to pass. Poor Cicely ! her troubles had begun even now, though she did not know what large stones Mrs. Bertrand was throwing in the rough road along which she was destined to pass, nor how Lady Susan was resolved to find out everything, and to do her best to remove these stumbling-blocks from her way. "She must have a careful talk with Sir Hubert, whom in her *laissez-aller* fashion she had forgotten to ask about his young wife's antecedents ; but it was imperative that Society should be silenced. As for the lady she was living with in Paris, as long as she did not appear on the scene it did not much matter who she was. She could not be very shady, since every one seemed to know her. What was her name ?" (This latter sentence aloud.)

"Whose name ?" asked her shadow, Lord George.

"The woman Lady Fleming was with in Paris."

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan."

"Ah, yes. Did you know her ?"

"A little."

"What is she like?"

"Well, she is a fashion. No one knows where she came from, and I should not imagine she always moved in the world to which she now belongs."

"Now, why do you make that assertion, Lord George? You are getting as cynical as Algy Duncombe. By-the-by, he will be able to tell me all about this Mrs. Fitz."

"He does not know any more than I do. We have talked the matter over fifty times. There is one man who could tell you, though, Lady Susan," he continued, dropping his voice to a whisper—"Durant."

"Good gracious! You don't mean to say there is any truth in Mrs. Bertrand's insinuations?"

"They have as much foundation, I suppose, as malicious reports generally have. I know nothing positively, but I have always suspected a *liaison* of some sort between Durant and Mrs. Fitz."

"Mercy! But that has nothing to do with us—the case in point is about Lady Fleming."

"Well, it is odd that she should have been fished out of a country village to go and live with Mrs. Fitzalan in Paris."

"Really, Lord George, I'll dismiss you from my acquaintance if you retail such abominable scandal. Recollect, too, if you are to be my friend you must be Cicely's. I will not have a word uttered against her in my presence."

"With all my heart," he responded.

She then went on, as though thinking—

"But this is a very strange amalgamation; I shall not be able to sleep for thinking of it. How all these people are jumbled up together, too! So Cis comes from Swinton does she? Why, your cousin is the vicar, is he not, Lord George?"

"Yes; but he is a sententious old beggar. It would not be worth the railway fare to go and ask him questions, for all the answers you would get."

Lord George was a poor man, and had a wise habit of reckoning his shillings.

"Oh, but I *must* know something ; I shall not rest till I do."

"Really, Lady Susan, I thought you hated scandal."

"So I do ; but this is not scandal, only a desire to befriend Cicely and frustrate ill-natured remarks."

"Then why not ask her for the truth ?"

"*À la bonne heure*, Lord George—that is the best suggestion I have heard yet ; but you always were celebrated for your good sense in a quiet way. Come and give me an ice or something—listening to all these innuendoes has made me feel quite faint."

And while Cicely and her past life are being canvassed from every point of view by sundry London coteries, she is striving to the best of her power to entertain her husband's guests with natural grace and as much easy *insouciance* as she can command. The main line of the conversation is plied by Algy Duncombe, who rattles on with his smart nonsense till he rouses the others into a temporary forgetfulness of themselves, and prevents Sir Hubert from marking the evident restraint and coolness which has sprung up between them. How Cicely thanked him in her heart, as she felt she could lean on his brotherly regard ! And yet Algy was quite unwittingly making himself very useful. It never entered his head to read between the lines ; and when he remarked that "Fleming's champagne would do them all good, for Lady Fleming looked very tired, and Durant was as stupid as an owl," it was in all good faith that he made the observation.

"Since his accident he had not been the same," was Durant's constant excuse ; "it had unnerved him somehow. He talked of going for a change, but he was too lazy to face the travelling."

"When London palls come down here for a bit—there is more air here than in the metropolis ; and Cicely and

"I will do our best to amuse you," was Sir Hubert's invitation.

Cicely played with her dinner and did not attempt to speak or even look up, for she felt the crimson colour rush even to her brow.

"Well, Cis, will you not welcome Durant?" said Sir Hubert, appealing to her for the second time that day on his friend's behalf.

"Oh, yes, certainly, with pleasure. I was not attending to what you were saying. I was thinking of that funny woman who came with the Bertrands—what did you tell me her name was, Mr. Duncombe?"

Ah, Cicely! what strides you are making in the art of hiding your feelings!

Harry Durant looked up in amazement. The mixture of warm feeling and cool indifference with which she had treated him to-day completely baffled him; but Algy Duncombe answered gaily—

"Oh, she is a Miss Croxton—an heiress—a sort of connection of yours, isn't she, Durant?"

"Thank the stars, no! She belongs to Mrs. Bertrand, and is almost as evil-tongued as my dear aunt herself."

"Nonsense! why don't you go in for her, old fellow? She is rather long in the tooth, and bald about the pate, but the money-bags are of the heaviest; at least, so they say. Of course a journey to Doctors' Commons, to ascertain the exact amount of defunct Croxton's will, would be advisable before committing one's self to such a bargain."

"Thank you, Algy, my boy; but have you not yet learnt that the inestimable blessing of liberty is not to be rashly tampered with? Possessing mine, as I do, I feel scarcely inclined to part with it lightly."

A sudden chill seemed to pass over Cicely—the flush faded from her cheeks—she became as white as the dress she wore. "Then he was not going to marry Rose Bertrand

after all! What wicked lies Mrs. Fitzalan had told her!"

"Durant, you are a fool," Algy had gone on. "It is high time a vagrant like you settled down into matrimony—I am sure Mrs. Bertrand would tell you so."

"No doubt, but she would not thank you for pairing me off with 'beauty Croxton,' as the wags call her," he answered, with a forced laugh; "though she has cooled considerably to me of late—I have not been asked to dinner for a fortnight."

"Neglect, my dear fellow—she thinks neglect will bring you on."

"Not a bit of it; she has given me up as a bad job, and is flying at that fair fellow Seton, who has lately put in an appearance in London—has a yacht, in which he has been round the world, or some nonsense."

Algy burst into a spluttering laugh.

"He won't bite. By Jove! that is too good. Fleming, do you remember curly-haired Seton?—you and I met him once at Homburg—the fastest little ne'er-do-weel in the place. Fancy Mrs. Bertrand angling after him!"

"Money, my dear Algy—you forget the requisites," suggested Mr. Durant.

Again Algy laughed uncontrollably.

"He has flown kites till all the paper in Israel is used up. So he is Mrs. B.'s last, is he? Really she is too delicious."

"Mr. Duncombe, you should not talk so of May's mother—it is very naughty," said Cicely, meekly, feeling she must say something, unless she wished her silence to be noticed.

"That is right, Cis; call them to order—they will want it, both of them, I can tell you, for they are merry spirits." And Sir Hubert smiled across the table at his wife.

"I would not malign my future mother-in-law for

the world," said Algy, "if I did not feel she thoroughly deserved it."

"I should recommend you to wait till she is your mother-in-law, Algy, old fellow," suggested Sir Hubert.

"Ah, I wish the old thing was in heaven—but she sticks so persistently to the earth. May and I will have to elope."

"I'll help you," cried Harry Durant. "I hate to see people parted who were meant to be joined, for the sake of a mere whim."

"Oh, Mr. Durant, I thought you were a partisan of order."

Again it was Cicely's voice that spoke.

"I am a partisan of straightforwardness, Lady Fleming, and I hate duplicity in every form. People ought to know what they like and want in this world, and be able to stick to it."

Cicely shut up once more like a closed book, but Algy as usual put in his word.

"Very well in theory, Durant; but you know the old axiom about principles coming from the angels, actions from the devil."

Mr. Durant looked at him fixedly for a moment. Had the remark a direction and an aim, or was it a mere random shot? There was fortunately no opportunity for an answer, as Cicely rose—only too thankful to make her escape.

"It was a pleasure to see Harry Durant. Ay, but what a pain lay at the root? If only Sir Hubert would not ask him! What could she do to prevent it? Tell him the truth she dared not. Appeal to Harry Durant himself? No, she should never have the courage, at all events, not yet. She must wait the issue of events," and she sat and thought over her troubles and wept her girlish tears in the drawing-room, all by herself for nearly an hour, while the men were talking their familiar talk in the dining-room.

At last she starts up and seeks a corner of the sofa where she will be so shaded from the light that no traces of recent tears shall be perceived. It is only Algy; and how readily she welcomes him as "nobody," and throws herself with all the spirit she can command into the light bantering conversation in which he always revels, so that when the others at last follow him she is quite her own natural self—unreserved in her talk, which even with Harry Durant flows currently.

And as the evening passes pleasantly away, any danger-signals which may point to misadventure in the future are unheeded.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE RIDICULOUS.

SPRING has given place to summer, the snows have melted on the mountains; and Mrs. Fitzalan, bidding adieu to Babette and Mère Françoise, sets out to wander deeper into the wilderness—farther from the tramp of human footsteps and the track of civilization. She is growing used to the vast solitude. The passions and torments which distract her mind and rebel at the thought of being coerced by the petty worries of every-day conventional life, can have their full swing in these wild regions and rage themselves out at will. The villagers, unused to strangers, think her odd, perhaps half-witted. But what matters? She wants but little—even the black bread and goat's milk of the country content her when she can get no better fare. She has left the smiling valleys, with their fecundity of vegetation, and has travelled for miles across vast downs almost too bleak and rocky for the mountain-herds to find pasturage. It

seems a mad insensate scheme to give up the luxuries of her Parisian home and start alone on this sort of endless pilgrimage, but the longing to go out into infinity had come over her, and it must be gratified. After days spent in ascending the rocky upland she reaches at last a village which lies on the outskirts of a forest; there she obtains shelter for the night, and early on the morrow plunges into the depth of a wood in which black pines rear their majestic heads on the mountain side, crowning with their beauty and their grandeur the amphitheatre which lies below them. Once in the midst of these dark masses there is not even a footpath to be seen; the sun peeping occasionally through the mighty trees which obscure it with their foliage is the only guide, and onward Mrs. Fitzalan strides as though impelled by fate. Many an old monarch remains standing, though his leaves are yellow, and his roots no longer imbedded in the parent earth, are covered with green moss; others have succumbed to the power of time and are lying in sombre state beside the ever-running stream which bubbles down from the summit of the mountain. Flowers of every colour burst into life on each side of the water and vie with brilliant butterflies in producing the contrast which is so effectively striking when compared with the denser parts of the forest. After wandering on for some time she reaches an open swamp, on the banks of which the larger trees cease to exist, but are replaced by a colony of elder-trees, whose red fruit mingling with the wild honeysuckle forms a copse, in which the leaves of the raspberry flutter in the breeze, presenting now their verdant now their silvered surfaces. On the other side of this copse the pines again grow so closely together that it is almost impossible to pass them, the way, too, being difficult, and the rapid decline covered with slippery green moss. At no great distance there is the rushing of a mighty torrent, though it is continually hid from view by blocks of rock and the large leaves of the herbaceous plants.

Having arrived at the bottom of the ravine, Mrs. Fitzalan sits down on a fallen tree which forms a natural bridge across the water, and for a long time she remains there almost immovable, drinking in to the full the knowledge of her utter loneliness, glorying in the sensation that among all her numerous acquaintance no one would find her here. But inscrutable are the workings of fate. Round a corner formed by a projecting tree two men pass on a sudden into sight; they are evidently tourists, lured like herself into these haunts by the deep fascination of the silent solitudes. A little cry almost escapes her as she sees them, for not once but many times have they both been her guests. They, however, heed her not, but follow the course of the stream, while she, hoping to remain unperceived, begins to ascend from the ravine, where the heat is becoming oppressive. Many-coloured butterflies hover about, and bright insects run gaily over the leaves of the plants; the cry of the woodpecker breaks the almost death-like silence, and flies fasten themselves on her hands and face—sure presages of a coming storm. As she climbs farther and farther the wind howls piteously among the branches of the trees; and the sun, but lately so scorching in its power, is hidden behind swiftly passing clouds. Flash after flash of lightning succeeds each other rapidly; the distant thunder growls its angry menace. Then for a moment all is still—the voices of the birds cease, the butterflies stop their gambols, and the insects hide themselves beneath the large plants which alone court the coming rain. After this brief space of ominous silence, the wind grows louder and louder; huge pieces of wood and branches of trees tear through the air in rapid succession; the lightning and thunder follow each other instantaneously, the clouds grow blacker and blacker, till the darkness of night prevails. Trees are uprooted on all sides, and the crash with which they fall is undistinguishable from the booming of the thunder, while the rain

begins to descend in torrents. For more than half an hour Mrs. Fitzalan, the pampered queen of fashionable Paris, hangs on for protection to a young pine, and listens awe-stricken and breathless to the wild scene which passes round her, augmented as it is too by the echoes which triple every sound. At last, when she is well-nigh fainting from sheer exhaustion, a sudden lull prevails; the rain grows less violent, the darkness less dense, the huge black clouds transform themselves into moving masses of misty vapour which hang about the pine-trees. In an incredibly short space of time harmony, as though recalled by magic, reigns once more; and except for the mountain streamlets which during the last half-hour have been transformed into torrents, all symptoms of storm are hushed—for as the sun bursts forth in glory a balmy smell fills the air, and nature begins forthwith visibly to restore the devastation wrought by the elements; and so rapid is vegetation in these parts that even as you gaze flowers seem to unfold their petals, fungi of all species to burst into life.

Wet to the skin, and terribly startled and impressed by the great disruption of nature she had so lately beheld, Mrs. Fitzalan began to grope her way through the rain-bespattered tangled underwood in the direction of some cottages she had perceived at starting; but it was no easy journey, the ground had become so slippery from the rain that it was but seldom she could succeed in establishing a sure footing. At last, after a long and exhausting walk, she saw before her a rude hut or cabin. She hailed the sight with a more lively sensation of delight than she had felt since her impromptu flight from Paris. Wet, chilled, and footsore, animal instincts were superseding those wild tumultuous feelings she had allowed to be so dominant of late, and she longed for the companionship of a fellow being, the sight of a friendly face. Bitter, then, was her disappointment when, on knocking loudly at the closed door of the hut, she received no answer from within;

naught but the solitudes responded as the wind gently stirred the foliage around.

"Come what may, I can go no farther," Mrs. Fitzalan murmured as she threw herself almost fainting down on a soft piece of turf in front of the cottage. How long she lay there she scarcely knew, for consciousness and strength both deserted her. She was at last awakened to the former by hearing the sound of voices.

"Dieu, c'est la veuve Anglaise des Champs Élysées."

"Comment—impossible."

"Bien vrai, c'est elle, et à demi morte—sans doute elle s'est égarée—que faire, mon Dieu?"

The voices were those of the two men she had seen some hours ago in the ravine.

For a moment or two after she recognized them she did not speak nor move. "What explanation could she give? Ah! they had provided one. She had lost her way and her companions." She raised herself and looked at them with a sort of stare. Mrs. Fitzalan never laid wholly on one side her capabilities for acting.

"Where am I?" she asked. "I suppose I have lost myself. Never will I start on a mountainous expedition again. Ah, Monsieur de Germont, how comes it that you are here?"

"Mais, madame, like yourself, we are in search of the beauties of la grande nature. For us men it is rough work; pour une dame organisée comme vous it is almost impossible."

"We English are fond of roaming, and have a marvellous capability for enduring," she said, smiling, as she rose.

Mrs. Fitzalan was fully sensible that the situation in which she had placed herself savoured somewhat of the ridiculous, but like a true woman she resolved to face it unflinchingly. Her toilette, on the perfect *cachet* of which she had always prided herself, was dragged and travel-

stained. This knowledge, perhaps, sat more heavily on her mind as she found herself face to face with two members of the *jeunesse dorée*, than the recollection of all the manifold reasons and miseries, both real and imaginary, which had induced her to leave Paris.

"I am very wet and tired. Is there no making any one hear in that cottage?" she asked her companions.

"Just what we were hoping to do before we had the honour of finding madame. A fire and a hot 'grog' would indeed be welcome at this moment. *Moi j'ai du cognac si madame en veut.*"

Mrs. Fitzalan, on the mountain side, unattended, exhausted, *chiffonnée*, drinking cognac with two Paris exquisites, who by some freak of chance had, notwithstanding the storm, retained the pristine freshness of garment with which they had set out in the morning! Here was a descent from the wild poetry of her somewhat incoherent dreams. She accepted the situation, however, with a smile, and drank the cognac thankfully. No, there was no rousing the inmates of the hut. It was evidently merely a *pied à terre* for some shepherd, and, if they succeeded in opening it, would afford but little accommodation. It was roughly built, with no windows, only slits in the wall, through which light and air were but imperfectly admitted; and, on scrambling up to look through one of them, M. de Germont discovered there was naught in the interior save some straw for a bed, a rickety table, and some tin pots. Fireplace there was none, unless a spot under a hole in the roof, marked by a few burnt-out sticks, might be so called.

"*Tiens!* what is to be done?" And the Frenchmen looked at each other inquiringly.

"*Les Burons!*" cried M. de Germont, as though struck by a sudden inspiration. "Can madame walk a little farther? *Bien sûr*, they are not far."

"Oh yes, if I am likely to find a temporary *gîte* for a

few hours, however rough it may be. Let us start at once. M. de Germont's cognac has revived me."

She gathered her clinging wet skirts round her and followed M. de Germont, who undertook to serve as guide to the *Burons*. After nearly three-quarters of an hour of rough uneven walking, during which Mrs. Fitzalan's physical powers were being tried to the utmost, they arrived at the promised *gîte*.

Les Burons, where cheeses are made and during the five or six months of winter the cattle are sheltered from the snows, are nothing more than niches on the side of the mountain, the front part being composed of branches of trees and dried turf, while the larger portion of the cave or hut is subterraneous. In the interior of these pastoral cabins there are three divisions, for they can scarcely be dignified by the name of rooms. In the first the fire necessary for domestic purposes is lighted, the smoke escaping from a small opening among the branches; in the second chamber the utensils in use for cheese-making are ranged; and the third or back portion of the hut is employed as a resting place for the herdsmen, who sleep in boxes or drawers made of pine-branches, with nothing but a little straw or heather by way of bed. The shepherds, however, share the possession of even these rude couches with the cheeses, which when nearly ready, in a state in which they are called "*fourmes*," frequently dispute with the herdsmen the possession of their primitive sleeping quarters. The large dogs which guard the cattle when grazing on the mountains are also admitted into the general chamber of rest, and it is not unusual for six or eight pigs to break through the thin partition which divides the sty appropriated to them from the rest of the hut, and to join this singular reunion of men, beasts, and cheeses. A strange complication, and one from which even rigid cleanliness cannot succeed in excluding a mixture of inhalations which would speedily be condemned by an

English sanitary commission as unhealthful, if not actually pestiferous.

To this small outlying colony did M. de Germont conduct Mrs. Fitzalan, and thankful enough she was to hail even this primitive dwelling-place, though in her heart she was sorely disappointed when she beheld it. Wandering among the vast Auvergne solitudes alone with her uncontrollable passions was grand in idea, but Mrs. Fitzalan was too accustomed to dwell in luxury ever to have thought it possible that such a "horrible place," as she mentally designated the *Burons*, could possibly exist, or that human beings could herd together thus with animals. Being summer-time, the cattle and shepherds were on the heights; but the cheese-making portion of the establishment was working busily, and more than one good-natured peasant came forward to offer such hospitality as the place afforded to the poor tired lady who had been drenched in the storm. In fact, so hearty were they in their offers of assistance that Mrs. Fitzalan almost forgot her aversion to the *entourage* in the novelty of the situation. She was ere long habited in various *paysanne* garments; and, pleased with her own appearance in the becoming dress of the Auvergnate, she once more assumed towards her two companions the manners and commands of a *grande dame*.

Even while she sat there languidly sipping goat's milk and eating with some distaste the *fromage du pays*, she never forgot that it was necessary to escape from this adventure in a manner as little compromising as possible to her own dignity. She had not owned to the fact of being quite alone; she had missed her party, was the only explanation she had vouchsafed. To get rid of the two men who had done her faithful service in her emergency must be her next effort.

"I cannot walk another yard to-day," she said. "This little peasant girl has promised to make me up a bed for

the night. It will be something to talk of when one gets back to Paris."

"Ah, madame, to think of you in a place like this! And your friends, they will be alarmed. What can we do?"

"Return to your hotel—at St. Nectaire I think you said you were staying—and take with you my warmest thanks for your escort and protection."

"*Comment*, madame, and leave you here alone?"

"One of these worthy *montagnards* will conduct me to-morrow in his *charrette* as far as La Queuille, where, at the little *auberge*, I shall meet or at least hear tidings of my friends."

"But, madame, I will accompany you with pleasure," cried M. de Germont. "For you to drive over this *terrain mouvementé* in a *charrette* is not to be thought of; and the *auberge* at La Queuille is a miserable place."

"In rough countries one must use one's self to rough ways. If I had not desired a thorough change I should scarcely have left Paris, M. de Germont."

"But to leave you here alone, madame!"

"The story, when related for the amusement of some *coterie de ville*, will sound less compromising," she answered, haughtily.

"Ah, madame, *vous me croyez capable*."

"I believe all men capable of everything, and never trust them," she replied, half-laughing.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We have our dismissal," he said, turning to his friend. "*Partons—au revoir*, madame, in Paris."

"*Au revoir*, *messieurs*, et mille remerciemens."

CHAPTER XXV.

M. BARBIER.

VICTORINE is lounging idly in a *fauteuil*, looking out of the window. Since Mrs. Fitzalan has left her apartments in the Champs Elysées Victorine has put her work on one side and given herself up to "*les petits plaisirs de ce monde*;" but it is raining, and it is scarcely worth spoiling her clothes by going to the fête at Asnières, so she is bemoaning her ill-luck and trying to yawn herself into a good humour.

A hired carriage rolls lazily under the *porte cochère*, but Victorine heeds it not till the bell is pulled violently; then she shakes herself and goes to the door.

"Madame—*quel plaisir*—and I who have looked for you with impatience. But, *Dieu*, what clothes! Where have you been?"

"Get me coffee, and I will tell you all about it. Where is Celestine? Desire her to get dinner quickly."

"*Tout le monde est sorti*, I alone watch the *appartement de madame*. But madame shall have coffee directly."

"And a *peignoir*, vite."

So, after all the tumult and rage and fury, Mrs. Fitzalan's coming home was a very common-place affair—she had gone out like a lioness and she returned to all outward appearance as a dove. The meeting with M. de Germont and his friend had cured her. No, she could not stand, even although she heard them not, the sort of remarks she felt sure her prolonged secret absence from Paris would call forth. And half an hour afterwards, when, having got rid of her drabbed, untidy garments, she is lying in a pretty *peignoir* on a soft satin couch, sipping her coffee, she smiles complacently to herself as she feels she has worked

off the temporary madness, and that after a short rest in her own comfortable nest she will be ready to take up the cards of life once more.

"Now, madame, *dites donc*. To go off *sans un mot* and leave me here alone ! But it was unheard of."

"I could not help it, Victorine—there were reasons, child, which made it imperative that I should take a sudden journey into Auvergne."

"But to be away three months and leave no commands ! *Moi, je vous croyais morte.*"

"You waited on, though, in the hope I should come to life again," said Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing.

"*Le Monsieur Anglais*, he arrive after you are gone. '*Attendez toujours, petite Victorine, madame will return,*' he say, '*et j'attends.*'"

Mrs. Fitzalan's brow clouded over.

"How dare he answer for her actions ? How could he know that the inward storm would spend itself at last ?" But she said no word to Victorine, save to ask her if he had been there again.

"*Non, madame, personne—le monde n'est plus à Paris—*only letters—*dame*, what a correspondence madame has !"

"Bring them, Victorine, and while I read them go and order me a dinner from the restaurant. Take the key ; I do not care to be disturbed. When Celestine comes in tell her I shall dismiss her. I like *my* servants to be in readiness."

"*Tiens ! quel chance—et moi qui grognais la pluie,*" muttered Victorine as she went off, shrugging her shoulders, to do her mistress's bidding.

Mrs. Fitzalan speedily runs her eye over the mass of letters Victorine has left with her, and selects one or two for immediate perusal. There are two from Cicely and one from Sir Hubert, all breathing of content. This pleases her well, for Mrs. Fitzalan has no spite against the girl she had learnt to like, if not to love, during the short time

she was with her, and it was not in the programme that she should be made unhappy, except as an inevitable consequence of her acquaintance with others. So far the missives are satisfactory; but there is one in a handwriting Mrs. Fitzalan does not recognize. She opens it wearily; the interest it is likely to afford is *nil*. Yet stay; she rouses herself as she glances at the signature. A fresh complication has arisen in the somewhat tangled machinery of her life. The signature is that of the vicar of Swinton. Wherefore has he written now? for, as Cicely has told Harry Durant, he never vouchsafed a line when he heard of her intended marriage. There is that in his letter which sets Mrs. Fitzalan thinking deeply. She does not seem ruffled or excited, only as if some subject has been brought under her consideration which requires to be steadily worked out, like a problem in Euclid. There is no rashness, no impetuosity about Mrs. Fitzalan now. Perchance her adventure among the mountains has worked off the superfluous steam and left her more capable of tackling the difficulties of every-day life.

After a while she went on reading the other letters which lay there, but there was nothing of farther importance. and to the *Madame est servie*, which Victorine announced, she responded with an amount of appetite which scarcely betokened that she was seriously worried, and drank her Hockheimer as though the good things of this world still afforded enjoyment. Then, after a short rest, Mrs. Fitzalan turned out the contents of the old escritoire, burnt sundry papers, docketed others; in fact, set herself to work with a business-like energy which could scarcely be without a meaning. Accounts were entered into, long lines of figures added up, and all the fatigue engendered by a long and rapid journey seemed to be wholly forgotten.

Three times has Victorine suggested *que madame doit se coucher*; each time the abigail has been told to seek her own couch and leave her in peace. At last, however, the

work for the time being seems to be ended, and Mrs. Fitzalan stretches herself with a yawn. A few hours of restless slumber, and she is busy once more, looking through sundry portfolios and desks; then she dresses herself with an amount of care in striking contrast to her mountain toilette. No woman, as Algy Duncombe often says, knows so thoroughly as Mrs. Fitzalan the value of appropriate clothes. On this occasion she wears black, well fitting and rich in texture; a coquettish bunch of poppies in her bonnet being insisted on by Victorine, who hates what she calls *les vêtements de la mort*.

"Madame is going out alone—shall I not call a *voiture*?"

"No, Paris is empty, and I am not going far."

She saunters across one of the side-streets, and, with a small bundle of papers in her hand, walks slowly down the Rue Faubourg St. Honoré till she reaches the Rue Tronchet; here she pauses and looks about, as though seeking rather a well-known house than a remembered number.

"It is there." She crosses the road, enters a sort of courtyard, and merely saying "*Au quatrième*" as she passes the *concierge*, begins to mount the almost interminable flights of stairs for which French houses are so famous.

"M. Barbier?"

She is admitted forthwith into a sort of outer office, furnished in rigid simplicity, with no carpet, a table and two chairs, the only portion of the room which has any pretensions to decoration being the mantelshelf, with its gay looking-glass and bright clock.

For two or three minutes Mrs. Fitzalan waits there, and then from an imperceptible door in the wall a little fussy, spectacled man makes his appearance. He is neither young nor good-looking, and is decidedly inclined to *embonpoint*, but he has shrewd hawk-like eyes, which it is evident the spectacles are intended rather to conceal than assist.

"To what am I indebted for this honour? It is a long time since I have had the pleasure of seeing madame."

"I have been away in Auvergne for change."

"*Comment*—two years in Auvergne, madame?"

"Ah, monsieur, it cannot be two years since we have met." And Mrs. Fitzalan coloured perceptibly.

For answer he turned to a large book which was on the table and shewed her the entry of her last visit.

"But, madame, it rejoices me *not* to see you," he said, with much politeness, "for then I know that madame is happy."

"And you, monsieur—all goes well with you—*belle clientèle*—payments *au jour*—or I on my part should have heard."

"Thanks for the amiable inquiries of madame, my worldly prospects are fair, considering the abject terrorism which exists in the money market generally."

"Abject terrorism is to be found in other places besides the money market, M. Barbier; but it can be counteracted by pluck and a high venture. *N'est-ce pas?*"

"*Si, si*, madame, if wisdom and prudence guide the hand that throws."

"A fig for your prudence. Luck is the best thing to court when the stake is high." And she looked at him recklessly.

"*Dieu*, madame what has happened?"

"My downfall is threatened, and with it yours, since they are tolerably inseparable."

"*Pas tout à fait*, madame—*pas tout à fait*, j'ai amassé un *petit peu*."

"*Misérable!* Is money all you care for? Are position and good opinion nothing?"

He laughed with a sort of inward chuckle, while the bright eyes sparkled behind the glasses.

"My experience has taught me that money always commands position," he said.

"Such a position as yours, yes; but mine, M. Barbier?"

"*Au plaisir de madame*—what can I do to support it? Has madame been compromising herself with some lover? *C'est là la faiblesse des femmes.*"

"Lovers at my age! Don't talk nonsense, M. Barbier."

"Madame is adorable enough to command a regiment of lovers."

"Bah! Mr. Durant has begun a system of persecution."

M. Barbier bowed his head and smiled.

"I said well that it was a lover, madame."

An angry frown spread itself over Mrs. Fitzalan's brow—her eyes gleamed with hatred.

"Say rather an enemy," she said, fiercely.

He shrugged his shoulders, as though he fully comprehended the situation.

"*Guerre à l'outrance, je comprends.* Now, madame, the details."

"Miss Wilson is not dead—two years ago, when I was here, you assured me of her death."

He looked once more into the large book.

"Mary Wilson—*Anglaise—paralytique—nécessiteuse*," he read out. "*Comment*, madame, she is as good as dead; she cannot injure—she is in her *pays*—will not come to Paris."

"Nonsense, M. Barbier. I am astonished at your credulity. She is in London, and though wounded has not lost her fangs. This woman must be silenced. She has given papers to Harry Durant."

"*Allons*, madame, *he* seems, then, the most formidable foe."

"Leave him to me," said Mrs. Fitzalan, savagely. "Only listen. In two days I shall leave for England. You, as my *homme d'affaires*, will look after my interests and my apartments during my absence. Let everything be done *en règle*. Once in London I will discover the

address of Miss Wilson. You will find means to silence her, while I fight the battle with Mr. Durant."

"Madame is not afraid to show herself in London?"

"I am safer there than here. It was all by your miserable advice that I came to Paris, where at any hour I am liable to detection. Oh, M. Barbier, it is a hateful life."

"Madame could not exist without excitement, and to have excitement one must endure shadows as well as sunshine."

"*Chut!* I want no theories. In a word, are you going to remain now, as in the past, my firm ally?"

"As madame has herself observed, her downfall is mine."

"*Bon,*" said Mrs. Fitzalan, tersely; "then you will take these papers and continue to draw my income, and transmit it to the address I shall send you in London. Of course you will pay yourself for your trouble—that I need scarcely tell you. But between such friends as we are, M. Barbier, a few hundred francs is no consideration."

The little man laughed. He saw full well that fear was haunting Mrs. Fitzalan, or she would not have been so generous with her money.

"*Un petit détail,*" he said, "since we are on business I should like explained. As I have had the honour to inform madame, it is two years since we met. During the last twelve months an event has occurred—*cette jeune demoiselle?*"

"Ah, you know all about that!"

"*J'habite* Paris, renowned for its secret police," he said, simply.

"Then you want no farther information."

"Madame has been excessively imprudent; and not to have consulted me as her colleague was an unpardonable omission."

"I was forced against my will—neither you nor I could have resisted the power."

"*Toujours les amants*," said the little man, cynically, screwing up his eyes.

"The girl, as you probably also know, is married."

"To a Milor *Anglais*, and your testament is made in her favour."

"By an English lawyer, who came over to Paris for the signatures—yes."

"And the whole of which testament is not worth the paper on which it is written."

It was Mrs. Fitzalan's turn to shrug her shoulders.

"It looks well to have *une héritière*," she said, laughing. "You did not think I should leave everything to you? You must take your pickings while I live, *mon ami*. After my death the disputes will be interminable."

"I have the proofs," he answered, quietly.

"And Miss Wilson—*Dieu*, M. Barbier, for an *homme d'affaires* you have lost your head. Miss Wilson has already placed proofs in the possession of Mr. Durant."

"*Sacré!* Then, with all our cunning, madame, *nous sommes vaincus quand même*."

"Not yet, not yet. *Restez tranquille*; I will write you word from England—you have not forgotten the old cypher?"

He bowed his head, and she went on—

"If I only knew where to go on arriving in London I would gladly remain incognita for a few weeks till I become mistress of all details. Later on I can offer a visit to the *nouveaux mariés*."

"*Tenez*, madame, I think I can be of service. I have acquaintance in all countries. This one has a good heart but a weak head—not to be trusted save as an honest man; and, living entirely out of madame's world, he may prove useful at this moment."

M. Barbier wrote a few lines on a piece of paper and handed them to Mrs. Fitzalan; and then, after a few more parting explanations on remittances of money, etc., the

lady rose to depart; and having deposited her bundle of papers, took a friendly farewell of the *petit homme d'affaires* who seemed to be so mysteriously mixed up with the secrets of her life. Two days later Mrs. Fitzalan started for England, after sending Victorine for a few weeks' holiday and consigning the key of the apartment to the *concierge*.

Truly, as Victorine observed on starting, "*Madame a la manie de voyager.*"

CHAPTER XXVI.

INCOGNITA.

"*Gott im Himmel*, but the child is mad! What can I make, what can I make *mit* her? Her *gesang* is of the angels; but for her spirit—what can I do, *mein* Gretchen?"

"It is no use to expect it, father; you might as well try to put an untamed zebra in harness as to turn Deb into a *Hausfrau*."

"I want not a *Hausfrau*—I want an artiste; but, with a voice of gold, she will yet go to ruin if we can train her not."

"It was a pity she left her broom."

"*Ach*, Gretchen, what for you say that now? We cannot let her go; we must be ever *mit* her."

"It seems she is no longer with us—she has been out since ten o'clock this morning. The question is, will she ever come back?"

"Where should the child stay? Ah, her voice, her beautiful voice, is it to be lost?"

Thus it will be seen that Deb was not altogether as amenable to authority as in the earlier days of her sojourn in the

Art School; the vagrant instinct, which would never be thoroughly eradicated, was so strong upon her at times that she was compelled to throw off the shackles of decorum and submission. It was not that there was any real harm in the girl, but it was part of her nature to be wild and free and outspoken, and moral training would never wholly change her.

Minna, who had the greatest influence over Deb, had gone to Germany, and steady-going Gretchen, in failing to comprehend the girl's erratic, volatile character, contrived not unfrequently to bring about the very mischief she would have given much to avert; so when she pulled the cord of propriety too closely, Deb would manage to cut it, and, rushing off once more into the London streets, which had been her home so long, would try and forget that she had got "to be made prim and polite."

Whither she went no one knew, for on her return from these adventures she would answer no questions, save to express her regret that she had been naughty.

Gretchen's patience was well-nigh worn out, and she at last resolved to appeal to her father for assistance and advice, though she felt it would be with little result—the girl's wonderful voice would in his eyes eclipse all her irregularities of conduct. To-day she has been gone much longer than usual, and they are almost beginning to imagine she will return no more, when, like a meteor, she flashes into the room—not subdued and regretful, as is usual after one of her secret outings, but with flushed cheeks and beaming eyes, in the full zenith of her beauty.

"*Grosser Himmel*," cried the German, "*was ist es denn mit* you, Deb, that like a mad maiden you fly thus through the streets?"

"Oh, papa Wurzel, I have seen the beautiful young lady again, and I thought she had forgotten me altogether."

"*Was für*, young lady? What do you talk of, child?"

"She as was here the night of the concert. She was

driving in ever so swell a carriage with that there melancholy man, and she stopped and spoke to me. 'Little Deb,' says she, ever so sweetly, 'ask Herr Wurzel to let you come to-morrow and spend the whole day.' And you will let me go, won't you, papa Wurzel? It will be so nice."

"You have bespattered all your tidy frock with mud, and torn it out of the gathers. Really, Deb, you are too bad. And to talk of going into a lady's house! Why, it is quite impossible. Where have you been all these hours?" Of course they were Gretchen's warning tones, and the tears rose into Deb's eyes.

"*Lass sein, lass sein, mein kind,*" said the soft-hearted old German; then, turning to Deb—

"So you have met the lady, little one, and she will you have to see her. I will not my refusal make."

"Oh, thank you, papa Wurzel, thank you."

"Stay, stay, listen. You must with my Gretchen go, make tidy your clothes, and give me one great strong promise that for a whole month from this day you will go no more alone into the street."

"With all my heart I make the promise."

"Only for a month," put in Gretchen.

"By little bits and little bits we make great works, my Gretchen. The child, *kleine Zigeunerinn* that she is, will be *mit* us at the end."

Deb threw herself on the top of the somewhat frail old man and hugged him; then she kissed Gretchen, and began to caper about the room, singing at the top of her musical voice till the tears coursed each other down the old German's face for the very love of the sweet sound; and Gretchen finally carried the girl off to be "tidied up" and made presentable for the morrow's holiday; "though whatever her ladyship would think of Deb's bad grammar and slipslop English," was a puzzle to good Gretchen, who had herself set to work to learn the language of her new

country by the strictest grammatical rules. Notwithstanding Deb's spoiled untidy clothes, Gretchen's resources under difficulties were by no means limited, and she was started off in the morning to Lady Fleming's looking clean and neat, her beauty enhanced by the very quaintness of the attire in which prim Gretchen dressed all the little pupils. This somewhat unusual invitation had created quite an excitement in the school-house; and, perhaps, not a little jealousy had been awakened in the hearts of some of the other children, who could not help recognizing the fact that their worldly position was an improvement on Deb's; but the Meister had called them to class, and Fraulein Gretchen had gone about her daily housewifely duties—surely tranquillity and order would once more reign in the little establishment which had known no irregularity or discord till Deb came. For an hour or two the musical instructions and the household affairs went on smoothly, then there was a ring at the bell, a chattering in the passage, and Gretchen, putting her head into the classroom, told the Meister he was wanted.

In the little front parlour, where visitors were received, sat a lady.

She rose as Herr Wurzel entered, and he in turn took off his velvet skull-cap, which was removed only on rare occasions.

"You have a school here, I understand, for music."

"Ja, madame; I train, for the love of the great art, young voices to make melody. Has madame a young sister who will add lustre to the work?"

"Alas, no," said the lady, catching at once the spirit of the old man's fancy. "On my wasted life no such joys as art alone can bring have ever descended. I have come to see you to-day at the request of a mutual friend whom I saw but a few days ago in Paris—M. Barbier."

The German's eyes twinkled at the sound of M. Barbier's name; and even Gretchen, who during the first

part of Mrs. Fitzalan's speech had been rather inclined to vote her a humbug, assumed a much more pleased and genial expression of countenance.

"Ah, M. Barbier, he was a good friend to me when in the great world of Paris I was suffering destitution for my art's sake. He loves the great melodies, M. Barbier; and his violin, does he play it now?"

"I dare say," answered Mrs. Fitzalan, who was totally ignorant on the subject of M. Barbier's musical proclivities. "I have a note from him which will explain the object of my visit."

After carefully reading the missive Wurzel passed it to his daughter.

"Here, in this poor house, to receive madame! But we would not dare."

"Ah, Herr Wurzel, you do not know how simple my tastes are. All I ask is a quiet bedroom, where I can be at peace when the turmoil of some business which has brought me to England allows me a little time for repose."

"There is a bed-room the lady can have, father, if she thinks it good enough for her," said Gretchen, who perhaps saw a means of increasing the contents of her slender purse if this stranger, who came with so good an introduction as that of M. Barbier, were admitted as an inmate.

"Can I see it?" asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

"With pleasure." So she accompanied the good Gretchen upstairs, and was shown into a tidy but scantily furnished room on the second floor.

"Shall I not die of horror in this abominable garret?" was her mental question, while aloud she expressed her perfect satisfaction, and entered into monetary details with a preciseness and a generosity which completely won the heart of the thrifty Gretchen. "She would dine with the family, of course. How charming! So all the dear children sang. Delightful! M. Barbier must have intended it for a surprise, as he had not told her of half the

pleasures Herr Wurzel's house contained. Might she too be allowed to soothe her weary hours by hearing a little music? Ah, yes; she would fetch her luggage from the hotel where she had passed the night, and towards evening she would be quite installed."

"The child who like an angel sings is out for a holiday," said the German, who was thoroughly fascinated by Mrs. Fitzalan's amiable manners. "To-morrow you will hear her. *Ach Gott*, she will be a great singer."

"So you give your pupils holidays. How good of you, Herr Wurzel."

"Poor *kinder*, poor *kinder*, they have few friends; to most of them Gretchen and I are their only ones; but this wild Deb, with her singing, her eyes, and her variableness, has charmed a great lady—how calls she, Gretchen?"

"Lady Fleming, father."

Mrs. Fitzalan gave a start, but it was only momentary.

He did not remark it, and went on—

"She send for the child to help please and pass her idle hours for her."

"Does she often come here, this lady?" asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

"*Ach nien*, she comes not, only once a year at the *fête*—that was six weeks gone—when she heard Deb sing."

And the German and Gretchen prattled on of the children, the household arrangements, etc. etc.; but Mrs. Fitzalan became suddenly quiet and as it seemed uninterested. Truth to relate, she was thinking over the probable complications which might arise from her temporary residence under Herr Wurzel's roof. Yes, she would chance it. The information might be more easily obtained, the machinery more readily worked, if she could succeed in charming into her service this girl they called Deb. At all events she would stay for a day or two and make the acquaintance of the girl. So she brought herself back to the level of Gretchen's conversation, and asked all sorts of questions

relative to Deb with the interest of one who loves good Samaritanism for its own sake and rejoices in witnessing acts of self-advancement. Interspersed with this more practical talk, she knew how to win the old man by an occasional little sentence showing how she entered *con amore* into his love for "his dear art." For which in parenthesis it may be remarked that Mrs. Fitzalan cared nothing, and of which she knew naught. She had lived long enough in the world with her ears open to have a smattering knowledge on most subjects. She knew that Mozart, Weber, Meyerbeer were musicians, though what their respective compositions were it would have puzzled her to tell. She knew, too, that Wagner was the apostle of the new school of so-called "music of the future," but in what the difference consisted between his views of the subject and those of his predecessors she had not the faintest notion. Never mind, she had only to suggest the heads to old Wurzel, and he filled in at once the long chapters of information in which Mrs. Fitzalan failed, and he liked her all the better for the opportunity afforded for talking on his pet theme and airing some of his craziest theories. Altogether Mrs. Fitzalan's introduction to the Wurzels was a success, and nearly two hours had elapsed before she left them to go in search of her baggage, and then she with difficulty prevented Gretchen from accompanying her who would so gladly "have spared the lady the trouble of moving her boxes herself." This would, however, in nowise suit Mrs. Fitzalan's plans. In the few hours which remained of the day she had much to arrange, in the carrying out of which Gretchen's presence would be seriously detrimental. No letters could reach her save from M. Barbier, who would forward all missives from Paris and alone knew her English address. She must write to him at once, and beg him to suppress, for the present, the name of Fitzalan entirely. "Madame Alan—the widow of a Frenchman—yes, that would do, and save a number of inquisitive questions. If

Deb chattered, as girls always do, Cicely would never trace under that name and description her old friend of the Champs Elysées." Then her boxes had to be unpacked and a few things suitable for her new life taken in a small trunk marked "Madame Alan ;" in fact, a good deal of time was spent before she thoroughly got rid of her prefix and was prepared to plunge into this fresh complication—the excitement attendant on which had a degree of charm for Mrs. Fitzalan which soothed her ruffled spirits and was altogether far more in accordance with the usual state of her temperament than that wild mountain expedition on which, in a moment of temporary insanity, she had so madly started. It was the middle of July, and London, though hot and dusty, was still tolerably crowded. The session was not over, and Goodwood had not yet taken the *beau monde* down to the sunny south coast; Mrs. Fitzalan, as she lumbered along in her four-wheeler, with her modest luggage on the top, saw more than one familiar face pass by her in a dainty carriage, and only pulled down a thick grey travelling veil she still wore just in time to avoid actual recognition from Algy Duncombe, who was waiting to cross a street till her vehicle should have passed. Yes, it was well she had selected quarters in a remote street; she must acquire, too, the art of changing her appearance somewhat. So she rumbled up to the door of the Art School just as Sir Hubert Fleming's carriage set down Deb. Happily the veil still concealed her features, for Cicely and Sir Hubert, on their way to a London dinner party, were the other occupants of the carriage.

Madame Alan, as she now called herself, having dismissed her cab, and the door being shut, next directed her attention to a general survey of Deb, who with girlish curiosity was lingering in the passage and wondering what this new arrival meant. She had taken off her bonnet and in her usual careless way thrown it on a table, and her lovely face and glorious eyes, with their silken fringes, made an

impression on Mrs. Fitzalan which was almost a sad one.

"Another victim," she murmured to herself. "God! why is beauty given to women?" Deb meanwhile looked keenly at her and made her mental comments perhaps as shrewdly.

"Seen a bit of wear and tear, poor thing. She ain't bad-looking though; but she won't do after her ladyship."

First impressions on both sides having shaped themselves into an idea, words followed.

"Will you take this bag upstairs for me, if you please, Deb? I think that is your name."

"That I will, and the box too, if you like," cried Deb, always ready to be actively employed. Helping in the transport of the luggage they made acquaintance, and before half an hour was over Mrs. Fitzalan had heard enough of Cicely's home life to discover that the letters breathing of content and happiness did not contain all the truth, and that Deb, with her native acuteness, had marked the undercurrent which lay beneath the smooth surface, and which Cicely sought so vainly to conceal. Of course Deb's information would have been useless to anyone unpossessed of a key; but "she ain't a bit like a young thing—just sits as though she hadn't got no starch in her—limp like. But ain't she pretty, and ain't she quiet and good!"

Ay, full well Mrs. Fitzalan understood the symptoms, though passive inertness would scarcely have characterized her own passage through a similar phase.

"A little coffee upstairs—yes, that will be delightful. How thoughtful of Miss Gretchen!" And the coffee having made its appearance, and Deb having gone off to have her supper with the others, Mrs. Fitzalan is at last alone. She looks round the forlorn barrack of a room, in such striking contrast to her snug Parisian quarters, and laughs cynically.

"*Dieu*, what a fool I am!" she says as she catches sight of her features in a looking-glass from which the quick-silver is rubbed off in patches. "Why have I come here, instead of passively waiting the issue of events in my own house? Is it the spirit of Bohemianism that is alive within me, or"—and a dark look of hatred glared in her eyes—"is it the fiercer and more untameable spirit of revenge?"

And as she lay back in the rickety armchair which, being the only one in the house except her father's, Gretchen had put into the lady's room, the shadows gathered deeper and deeper about her brow, till you almost fancied you could see the evil angels fluttering with their dark wings and glaring with their savagely demoniac faces, and you turned away sick and horror-stricken, as if a glimpse into Gehenna had suddenly revealed itself in the twilight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONFIDANTE AND COUNSELLOR.

Two men are standing together in a club-window in St. James' Street, talking in low, almost whispered tones. They are Sir Hubert Fleming and Harry Durant. Clouds seem to have settled themselves somewhat thickly on Sir Hubert's brow, and his usually melancholy countenance looks sallow and ghastly in the strong light; while Durant's bright face is ruffled and the flush of annoyance sits angrily upon it. Can aught have gone wrong with Cicely? for it is evident that is no mere passing worry they are discussing so intently.

"If I had only known, I would have cut off my right hand before I had dragged her into this," Sir Hubert is saying.

"Ah, if it had only not been done quite so hastily," answered Durant.

"That was Mrs. Fitzalan's fault, not mine. 'If a marriage is to take place let us have it at once,' was her constant cry; and nothing loth, I followed her suggestion, without inquiring as carefully into details as I should have done."

"D—— her!" ejaculated Mr. Durant, fiercely. The baronet looked surprised at a violence which he did not think the circumstances of the case warranted.

"Have you, then, such grave fears for the future of my wife?" he asked.

Durant coloured up as he saw the slip he had made.

"Of Lady Fleming's future I was not thinking at that moment, but of sundry private grudges I personally owe Mrs. Fitzalan. But never mind her just now. This law-suit is really to be instituted against you, you say?"

"I have just received a letter from my lawyer notifying the fact."

"How long has your late wife been dead?"

"Ten years."

"And how long have you been trustee to this property?"

"Well, some fifteen or sixteen years, I should imagine. My wife's sister married about a year after we did, and, like a fool, I consented to be a trustee under the settlement, without inquiring sufficiently into the character for rectitude borne by my coadjutor."

"And do you positively mean to say that he has dissipated the whole fortune of your two nieces, and that they are coming on you to make it good? By Jove, Fleming, but this is a serious matter."

"Serious is not a strong enough word, my dear Durant—it is absolute ruin. Poor Cicely!"

"I'd fight it to the last," cried Harry Durant. "The man must have some property that one can pounce upon."

"Not a stiver left, they say."

"You must not believe all you hear. At all events, let us get hold of a sharp lawyer and see if he cannot make something out of it."

"With all my heart; but I am afraid it is only throwing good money after bad. I shall have to retrench frightfully; in fact, when this is paid I shall be a pauper. And I who had hoped to do so much for Cicely!"

"Keep a good heart, old fellow—you may pull through yet. Never say die at the very beginning."

"Ah, I have not got your easy-going temperament, my dear Durant. I often think it was both wrong and selfish in me to link that young life to my gloomy existence, especially as I notice she droops at times under the melancholy I cannot wholly throw off. And now this fresh trouble—oh, what a miserable fool I have been!"

"You have got an extra fit of the blues this morning, my dear fellow," said Mr. Durant hurriedly, writhing in mental torture the while as he was compelled to listen to Sir Hubert's confidences. "They will not mend matters. Let us do something practical, for goodness' sake. To see a lawyer at once is surely the wisest course."

"I feel perfectly powerless and dejected," replied Sir Hubert, "and trust entirely to your friendship for assistance. Poor Cicely! I shall never dare to tell her that ruin stares her in the face. Will you, as an old friend, tell her what has happened, Durant?"

"I! Fleming, are you mad?" And for a moment Harry Durant looked at him aghast; then he laughed noisily and excitedly. "Wait till ruin comes—that will be quite soon enough to make Lady Fleming acquainted with the fact. Come, old fellow, let us go out; we are calling forth observation by this private talk—we can chat much more freely in the street."

So arm in arm they sauntered forth together, Fleming relieving his overbarded mind by discussing the ins and

outs of his impending lawsuit, and receiving good counsel from the man he had selected as his adviser, and whose practical knowledge of the workings of life was seldom at fault. As long as he kept strictly to business details, Durant was all attention and ready to exert himself to the utmost, but when he strayed from the point at issue and discussed these untoward circumstances as they would affect Cicely he little knew the purgatory through which he forced his friend, or how bitterly that friend regretted that he had thought fit to select him from among the number of acquaintances he had in London to fill the part of confidante and counsellor. Should he go off abroad and leave Fleming to struggle with the lawyers as best he could? Nay, that would be in direct contradiction to all the laws of loyalty and good faith. A man surrounded by difficulties and possessing by no means a clear head for business matters had applied to him for help, and to go away and leave him in the hands of the Philistines was an act of cowardice of which Harry Durant under no circumstances would permit himself to be guilty. Cicely's husband, too!—the thing was impossible—he would keep as clear as he consistently could of the villa at Campden Hill, but as far as devoting all his mental faculties to Sir Hubert's cause in London was concerned, why, of course, they were thoroughly and unreservedly at his service till the work was done. Such were some of Mr. Durant's thoughts as, having parted from Sir Hubert after an interview with a lawyer, who by no means smiled on Sir Hubert's chances in the case, he walked meditatively back from the purlieus of Lincoln's Inn in the direction of the Park, which was still full of loungers not yet returned to their homes for a late lunch. The Bertrands, with Mr. Seton in attendance, were among the first people he met; and although his dear aunt did not smile as graciously on him as she had once done, yet she always received him with a certain amount of effusion, and on this occasion

seemed more than usually anxious to keep him by her side—more, perhaps, with the object of learning a few details which Durant alone could furnish, if he chose, than from any idea of retaining him as a “dangler.”

Rose was laughing gaily with Mr. Seton; May, rather preoccupied, was looking vainly round in search of Algy, who did not happen to be in the Park on that especial morning; but they both received Harry Durant cordially enough.

“You will be going down to Swinton soon, I suppose?” he was saying to his aunt.

“Yes, very soon now. May we hope to see you there?”

“Well, it is not unlikely I might run down for a day or two. I rather want to have a talk with Burke.”

“Only a day or two? Oh, Cousin Harry!”

“Well, Rose, it isn’t civil, is it?—only, you see, I have some rather pressing business which probably will keep me in town for some time.”

“You always have mysterious business, Harry. I should have thought country air would do you good. You have not looked well since your accident.”

“No, it shook me more than a broken leg ought to have affected a strong man. The doctors say they do not understand it.”

“Women sometimes are wiser than doctors, Harry—you should settle down quietly and marry. The vagrant life you lead is enough to make any one look ill.”

“I assure you I am as steady as old Time,” he answered, laughing; “and as for marrying, why, no one will have me—I am getting too old.”

“Pooh! Have you ever tried?”

“My dear aunt, don’t ask for confessions in the Park—that is too bad.” And he turned away laughing, as if to pass on; but Mrs. Bertrand stopped him.

“We see you so seldom, and I have a question to ask

you—stop one minute. In making up parties to stay in the house this autumn shall we ask the Flemings?”

“Why not?”

“That is just what I want you to tell me. Is there any reason why we should not?”

“None on earth that I am aware of.”

“But will it not seem rather strange for Cicely to come back to Swinton in so very different a position?”

“That is surely for her consideration when she receives your invitation—you and I can scarcely analyse Lady Fleming’s opinion on the subject, can we, aunt?”

“I cannot; but *you*, as her most intimate friend, are quite different,” replied Mrs. Bertrand, a little pointedly.

He did not contradict her—somehow he felt a contention on the subject would only open the door to farther remarks—but said gaily—

“I should think it would be rather fun for her to go back among her old friends as a big swell.”

“You will come and meet them, Harry, of course, if I do persuade your uncle to ask them?”

“Very doubtful—I shall probably be abroad before the autumn.”

“Paris again! Why, you and Mrs. Fitzalan seem quite inseparable.”

Mr. Durant’s brow lowered, and he was about to answer angrily; but discretion triumphed, and he said, with a forced laugh—

“How I should be envied by other men if I possessed but half the intimate acquaintances among the ladies that you ascribe to me, *ma tante!*”

“Well, I don’t approve of your Mrs. Fitzalan,” she answered. “I have a great idea that she is an adventuress.”

“*Qui sait?*” he said, quietly, shrugging his shoulders. “I assure you it is a matter of the most perfect indifference to me who she is. If she does not choose to air

her pedigree *pro bono publico*, why should we inquire into it?"

"So like a man!" cried Mrs. Bertrand. "But if we did not weed out the tares which will get into Society, why, they would soon have the preponderance."

"Well, if the pruning-hook were put into my hands," said Harry, laughing, "I should begin with the stinging-nettles. But then, as you justly observe, I am a man."

Mrs. Bertrand looked annoyed. Somehow she always contrived to get the worst of it when she entered the lists to tilt with her nephew.

He was enjoying his little triumph secretly, when on a sudden May exclaimed—

"Why, what a sensation there is down there! Something must have happened—I hope it is not an accident."

Seton and Durant started off at once, leaving the ladies still seated under the trees. The horse in a victoria had taken fright at a child's ball, which had been carelessly thrown across the road in front of it. It was plunging and rearing frightfully, while people were running hither and thither in a state of dire consternation. A lady was sitting in the little open carriage which was in imminent danger of being momentarily kicked to atoms. She did not attempt to throw herself out, but clung pertinaciously to the side of the victoria, her lips tight-set, her eyes closed, as pale as death.

"My God!" was Harry Durant's ejaculation as he saw her; and pushing through the gathering crowd with an impetuosity which might have been resented under less excitement, he gained the side of the carriage. He was only just in time—another plunge from the frightened animal and the coachman was off the box. Several gentlemen surrounded the horse and succeeded in calming it to a certain degree.

"The lady has fainted—how will she be got out?" said

a voice in the crowd. Another moment and Harry Durant's arm was round her.

"Cicely—my darling Cicely!" he whispered as he lifted her from her perilous position.

She opened her eyes and looked at him as she had done long ago in the vicarage on the night of Peter's death; then she closed them again, and lay there passively, as though content to be borne away by him into infinity.

Ladies, however, came forward with smelling-bottles, fans, and endless suggestions. Good officious people, they little knew how miserable was the awakening they were so anxious to effect, what happiness was that death in life which had come over her as she lay safe in his strong arms. If he could only have carried her right away, he thought!—but the place was public, and the conventionalities must be respected for her sake; so he drew back to a little distance and let the women-folk potter round her with their eau de Cologne and their kindly regrets, while he, leaning against a tree close by, watched the scene in silence. She was brought back to consciousness at last; and looking round wildly, as though in search of some one, murmured—

"Where is he? Is it all a dream?"

In a moment Harry Durant was by her side.

"The coachman has been picked up, and the horse is quiet, Lady Fleming. I am so sorry you have been frightened."

"Thank you," she said, quietly, as though searching in the memory which had not wholly come back to her for a knowledge of what had really occurred. With a sudden rush the whole truth seemed to come upon her, though the people, the Park, the accident were forgotten.

"Take me back to Swinton at once," she said, with a little hysterical cry.

Harry Durant looked helplessly round. What should he, what could he do? There was not one among all that

crowd of human beings that he could trust to go with Cicely in her present unhinged state.

"Shall I get a cab and take you home, Lady Fleming? I am afraid the carriage is seriously damaged."

"Do what you like," was Cicely's answer. "You always do the best."

"Was this the best, that he should accompany her alone to Campden Hill? Ay, anything to escape from the observation of all these people." But still he hesitated.

"Why, Cis, what is this I hear? You have been upset and frightened to death."

"Ah, Lady Susan Verulam—take her home, Lady Susan, take her home, and be tender with her. She has had an awful shock."

"Bless the man! why he is as white as Cicely. Take her home—of course I will; only I have no carriage here, and I am sure she cannot walk.

Numerous offers to lend carriages were at once tendered; and one of them being accepted, Mr. Durant gave Cicely his arm to support her still tottering footsteps.

"For mercy's sake be careful. We have both been mad to-day," he whispered as he led her along.

She did not answer save to cling more tightly to his arm.

Three minutes more and she was driving passively, her head on Lady Susan's kindly shoulder, *en route* to her home; while Harry Durant stood, with blanched cheeks and furrowed brow, watching the carriage till it was out of sight; then he bethought himself that the public eye was still upon him, and with a strong effort he conquered himself, gave prompt and practical orders about the carriage and the horse; talked the accident over with some of the idlers who still lingered on the scene; took especial care to go and give the Bertrands all the information for which he knew they were craving; then saying he would see if he could find Fleming at the club, strode off from a scene

where during the last half-hour so important a life-episode had been enacted.

Yes—he must avoid that Campden Hill villa. Of course he must go to-morrow and inquire how Lady Fleming was after her accident, then for weeks, months, it should not see his face, even if he went to the other end of the earth to avoid it. Thank God Lady Susan had arrived so opportunely. So far, things were all right—no one knew aught save that Cicely was sorely frightened. In future it should be his foremost thought to guard her honour and his own.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

KIND INQUIRIES.

THE day following the accident to Lady Fleming's carriage in the Park her door is beset by inquiries after her health, for the news of what had happened has spread like wildfire through fashionable London; and many people who have not yet left cards on the young bride take this opportunity of commencing an acquaintance. Amongst those who found their way to Campden Hill, rather late in the afternoon, was Harry Durant. He would just ask at the door how she was—it was scarcely likely after yesterday's shock that she would care to see him so soon.

“Her ladyship was pretty well—only rather nervous,” answered the servant who had been Sir Hubert's confidential attendant for years. “But would not Mr. Durant walk in? The orders were that if he called Sir Hubert particularly wished to see him.” Thus solicited, what excuse could Harry Durant offer? though he felt considerably relieved at being shown at once into Sir Hubert's private study, yet

"conscience makes cowards of us all," and Mr. Durant's conscience did not feel absolutely clear. What could the baronet want with him? Ah! after all it was probably only some more particulars about the impending lawsuit that he had to discuss.

Sir Hubert sat by the table writing, looking gloomier, more melancholy, if it were possible, than he had done before his marriage. Preoccupation about the business matters which hung over him, and of which he cared not to utter a word to his wife, sat heavily upon him, though the good man imagined that he showed no sign of trouble. Near the window, lounging on a tiny sofa with an open book in her lap, was Cicely. Sir Hubert started up when he saw his friend, the man on whom he had elected to lean for advice and help, and to whom he had now become doubly indebted for the new service he had rendered him. With an unusual amount of demonstration and a warmth of feeling of which most people would have believed him totally incapable he received Mr. Durant; and it was well, for, taken up with his own thanks, he noted neither the changing colour with which Mr. Durant suffered his expressions of gratitude nor the death-like pallor which had spread itself over Cicely's face when she beheld him.

"It is a nasty horse that; I should get rid of it if I were you, Fleming. Not vicious, perhaps, but easily frightened—quite as great a fault in a lady's carriage. Ah, Lady Fleming, I hope you are all right again to-day. It was nervous work yesterday, was it not? So lucky Lady Susan put in an appearance just at that moment."

And Harry Durant was very offhand, trying to hide the excitement under which he was labouring by pleasant rattle.

"So lucky *you* put in an appearance, you mean," said Sir Hubert. "Susan would not have been of much use. It was she who told me how you saved Cicely's life; for,

as for the little woman herself, I don't believe she knows what did happen."

The faintest pink tinge spread over her face as she said, in a low tone—

"Oh, yes, I know it all—very well."

She did not attempt to thank Mr. Durant, but lay there very passively, listening while he and her husband talked. She seemed thoroughly prostrate and exhausted, as though she had neither the desire nor the energy to move.

"Nervous prostration from a sudden fright," the doctor said, who had seen her that morning. "A little quiet and it would pass." This report satisfied Sir Hubert; but while Harry Durant talked his eyes rested lingeringly on Cicely. As she lay back there with closed lids probably she felt their gaze though she saw it not; and as he looked at her he perhaps read the signs more truly than the doctor had done—man of physic though he was. But then Harry Durant had known her when she was a village girl, scarcely a year ago; he had marked the quick phases of change through which she had passed, and yet he could scarcely believe that this pale, tranquil Lady Fleming was little Cis, the merriest spirit on Swinton Green.

"Was it her heart or her spirit which was broken, and how large a share had Mrs. Fitzalan had in the wretched work?"

Man-like, he did not ask himself whether he were in any way to blame, did not choose to remember how he had influenced Cicely's destinies; he only cursed the woman whom he believed to be the instrument who had worked failure both for Cicely and himself. Had she come across his path at that moment it is more than probable her downfall would have been accomplished with one blow. Harry Durant had only forborne to strike because the nobility of nature that was in him taught him that it was cowardice to crush a woman, even though that woman were his deadliest foe.

But none of these thoughts did he allow to transpire through that easy flow of talk for which he was renowned. He cracked little jokes with Sir Hubert, chaffed him about his taste in furniture and his art-proclivities with all the familiarity of established friendship.

"Talking of art, we have had that wonderful singing girl of old Wurzel's here once or twice lately. Cis has taken quite a fancy to her," said Sir Hubert.

"Little Deb—ah, she is an oddity. She used to sweep the crossing close to my diggings. I often threw her a coin."

"Oh, she chaunts your praises ceaselessly," said Cicely, opening her eyes and smiling.

"I am sure I don't know why she should. I suppose I was not the only one who gave her money. What is Wurzel going to do with her? She has a fine voice—there is no mistake about that matter."

"Send her abroad later on, I believe, to study."

"Send her to the deuce! She'll get into mischief abroad as sure as fate."

"Did I?" asked Cicely, who had closed her eyes again, and did not open them this time.

"You, Lady Fleming—do you compare yourself to Deb?"

"I was as friendless and as homeless," she answered, softly.

Mr. Durant looked annoyed; but Sir Hubert spoke—

"Cis is far too humble and too backward in relying on her own powers and abilities. Don't you think so, Durant?"

She sprang up with a dash of her old fire.

"I have no powers, no abilities to rely on," she said, laughing. "I was miserable and forlorn enough when grandfather died. Only Mr. Durant befriended me."

"To Burke, Lady Fleming, to Burke you are indebted for your education and your start in life—not to me." And his tones were cold and measured.

Cicely looked at him in surprise; then she lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes once more; while an idea came into Sir Hubert's head that he would one day have a little conversation with Harry Durant anent these matters. At this moment a servant entered with a card for Sir Hubert.

"Confounded nuisance! Why do people come on business at this hour of the day? Show him into the dining-room; I will be there directly."

Mr. Durant rose to take his leave.

"No, no, Durant, stop and talk to Cis. I shall not be many minutes, and I shall very probably want to consult you. It is a man about that business we were discussing yesterday."

Mr. Durant reseated himself, and, Sir Hubert having left the room, took up a book. There was an awkward pause, during which he seemed interested in turning over the leaves, while Cicely opened her eyes and watched him. At last she spoke.

"Have you heard anything of Mrs. Fitzalan lately?" she asked, more, perhaps, to break the horrible silence which oppressed her than from any real interest in the woman who she instinctively felt had marred her life.

"No, not lately. She has left Paris, I believe," he answered, without looking up from his book.

"Left Paris? How very odd!" And again there was a silence till Mr. Durant asked—

"Was she kind to you, Cis?"

The hot colour rushed over her face at the sound of the old familiar name—never used now in his newly-commenced intercourse with her.

"Oh, yes, she was very kind to me—that is, she gave me heaps of beautiful things, took me everywhere, and was very nice and good-natured in her way of speaking to me."

"What more did you want?" he asked, still pretending to be engrossed in his book.

"Oh, I don't know. Outward symptoms are not always reality, are they, Mr. Durant?"

"No, I suppose not—which means that you do not think Mrs. Fitzalan is altogether real?"

"I dare say she is as real as the most of us, but not as real as I fancied people to be—once."

"Heaven forbid that there should be many shams such as she is on the face of the earth."

"Then you do not believe in her?"

"I? My God! there is no woman for whom I have a greater contempt."

"Strange," murmured Cicely, "that, hating each other as you do, you should have selected her as my guide and friend."

He looked up from his book now straight at Cicely.

"It was fate, not I, my child; circumstances, not my will, linked your destinies with those of Mrs. Fitzalan. Could I have done otherwise, you should never even have known that she exists. Would to Heaven that you never had!"

Cicely did not answer him. Probably she echoed the latter part of the sentence, for she took to thinking, while he once more became absorbed in the book.

After a while a sudden flush spread over her face, and she said, excitedly—

"Mr. Durant, I have wanted so much to ask you a question. What is my real name? Do you know?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I was married as Fitzalan. Why should I be called Fitzalan?"

Three or four leaves were turned over with rapidity.

"What does it matter? You are Lady Fleming now."

"I am being reminded of that every hour of the day—I don't want you to tell me," she answered testily, as she got up from the sofa.

"Being then so very certain of that fact, what can it

matter about the past?" And he laughed very discordantly. But Cicely was angry.

"Oh, of course you only treat me as a child. I have been played at ball with ever since I left Swinton." And she began to walk about the room. "But I am a woman now, and I mean to act for myself. If I want to know things I intend to find them out and do as I like."

Harry Durant looked at her seriously for a minute; then he said—

"Probably you think I have no right to place myself uninvited in the position of Mentor, yet I cannot resist repeating the advice I gave you once in Paris. Do not seek to unriddle the secrets of Mrs. Fitzalan's life—you will become acquainted with them quite soon enough. Be happy while you are young and bright. You have a good and honourable husband. I have known him for years most intimately, and know well how worthy he is of the love and regard of a pure and virtuous woman. Be the light of his home, my child, and do not seek to peer into the dark recesses of other people's lives."

Cicely turned round in her walk and looked at him; then she said, slowly—

"Tell me, Mr. Durant, if I had asked you in Paris, would you have advised me to marry Sir Hubert?"

Her eye was on him as she spoke. For a moment he flinched under its gaze; then he answered, fervently—

"Ay, would I, Cicely—with all my heart."

God forgive him the lie, if it gave her strength to keep on in the straight path!

She continued her walk up to the window, and after a second or two began to laugh.

"Isn't it absurd of Sir Hubert keeping me boxed up here just because I had a minute's fright in the Park yesterday? I wish Algy Duncombe had come to-day; he would have made him take me out. You are as stupid as Sir Hubert."

"Where would you like to go?" And Harry Durant closed his book with a slam and jumped up. She was right: any amount of nonsense was better than the dangerous rocks about which they had been hovering of late.

"Oh, I don't know—to the theatre or the opera or somewhere—anything is better than being moped."

"We'll see what can be done with Fleming when he returns—I dare say he only wants the suggestion. Have you been much to the opera? Which opera do you like best?" And when, a few minutes later, Sir Hubert came into the room they were talking merry nothings with an amount of *abandon* which promised well for that future in which they both honestly hoped there would be no quick-sands.

"I have brought some visitors, Cis," said her husband as he entered, followed by Gretchen and Deb, who, having heard of the accident which had happened to Lady Fleming, had come to inquire after her. Deb coloured up when she saw Mr. Durant, and stood somewhat shyly at the door while Lady Fleming talked to Gretchen; but the exclamation, "Oh, you dear little thing, how good of you to have come!" restored her self-possession; and she went up to her new patroness, nor succeeded in avoiding the hearty hand-shake bestowed on her by Harry. Deb had a sort of vague idea that he was "demeaning himself by shaking hands with the likes of her."

"Now we will send for some tea, and you will stop and have a long chat," cried Cicely, who perhaps, felt herself more at home with these people than with the grander acquaintance to which she had been introduced since she left Swinton; though probably the old butler scarcely thought that these were the sort of folk who should have been received as boon companions by his master's wife. Cicely's cheery reception speedily put both Gretchen and Deb at their ease, and talk flowed more rapidly than it had

been wont to do with Cicely of late. It was the very incongruity about Deb which fascinated those who knew her, and Cicely no less than others.

Her genius for music, her lovely face, and her quaint ungrammatical lingo were in such direct contrast to each other that it was impossible not to be struck by the girl.

Sir Hubert and Mr. Durant were both more or less taken by her, and joined for a while in the conversation at the tea-table; but after a time they dropped into a private discussion about the business matters which had called Sir Hubert from the room.

Meanwhile Mr. Durant had not forgotten Cicely's wishes, and managed incidentally to suggest that an opera-box that evening was at their service if they liked to go. He regretted he had an engagement, or he would have accompanied them with pleasure.

"Durant tells me Bubb has orders to save us an opera-box for to-night," said Sir Hubert. "Should you like to go, Cis?"

She looked at Mr. Durant for a moment, and answered, smiling—

"Yes, if he will come too, and I may take Deb to hear the singing."

This was rather more than Sir Hubert—cosmopolitan though he was—had bargained for. His intimates scarcely gave him credit for much pride, yet he did not look altogether kindly on the idea of his wife appearing in a public place with a girl of Deb's appearance.

"Impossible" was just hovering on the tip of his tongue, when he noted the look of enthusiastic delight in Deb's violet eyes, and his heart failed him. As for Harry Durant, all the latent fun and merriment of his nature bubbled up, and he laughed more heartily than he had done since Cicely's marriage.

"Then it is settled," cried Cicely. "I see it written

on both your faces, and I am sure Fraulein Gretchen will not object."

"I shall be glad to do anything to please your ladyship," said Gretchen, meekly, "but I am afraid Deb will look out of place at the opera. I went once with my father, and the smart dresses of the ladies so frightened me I could not listen to the music."

"Oh, if that is all," said Lady Fleming, "I will dress Deb up in some of my clothes. What fun it will be! Leave her with me till to-morrow—do, dear Fraulein Gretchen."

Who could withstand Cicely's pleading? Certainly Sir Hubert could not, and he joining in her request, Gretchen was perforce compelled to return to the school without her charge, feeling rather uncomfortable and out of place at being accompanied part of the way by Mr. Durant, who hurried off to secure the opera-box, the mention of which had created such a revolution in the Flemings' calm household. Before he left the house he heard Cicely's and Deb's voices laughing gaily upstairs over the toilette they were improvising. Truly, he thought, all the childhood had not died out of Lady Fleming's life. There were yet merry days in store for her, and feeling this, he did not think it altogether necessary to forego the pleasure he would derive from looking into Lady Fleming's box at a late hour, to see how these young people were enjoying themselves. It never entered Mr. Durant's masculine head to inquire how much of this sudden outburst of gaiety was from a sheer love of frolic, how much was from the over-acted desire to appear totally indifferent to a man who had told her in so many words that her marriage with Sir Hubert was the very thing he had most desired.

CHAPTER XXIX.

EAVES-DROPPING.

"OH, it was quite beautiful! Lor' bless yer, nothing I ever heard tell of before could come up to that. There was dresses and lights and glitter, of course, but that was all nothing to the music. I just shut my eyes and thought, 'Well, if heaven is anything like this 'ere, I wish I was there straight off.'"

And with a glib tongue Deb was narrating her operative experiences to her young companions at the school-house, who had come crowding round her as soon as she returned from Campden Hill.

"Your friend, Lady Fleming, must have been quite pleased at your delight," suggested Mrs. Fitzalan, who had joined the group of listeners to Deb's rhapsodies.

"Wasn't she in spirits, just! I never thought she could wake up so lively. It is my belief it was all Mr. Durant, for they talked and laughed and joked together—it did one's heart real good to hear them."

"Was Sir—what is his name?—the husband there?" asked the fictitious Madame Alan.

"Oh, yes, of course, but he sat mute in the corner and looked on quite pleased like, though. Whatever made that young thing marry the likes of him, I wonder? The other gentleman, Mr. Durant, would have been my fancy."

"Perhaps she did not know him before she was married, or perhaps he does not care for her," suggested Mrs. Fitzalan.

Deb began to laugh.

"I know a thing or two about that, I suspect," she said. "I ain't a fool at noticing—'cuteness is born in gutters, they say."

"Cleverness in unravelling heart-histories is not usually found in gutters, though," said Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing. "How comes it that you know anything of the subject?"

"Most girls have eyes and feelings," answered Deb. "Not that I know anything by my own experience, though I dare say it will come—only, if ever I took a fancy to a gentleman, it would be to Mr. Durant."

"And after only one meeting to be so far gone as that! Really, Deb, I am surprised at you." And Mrs. Fitzalan could not forego a smile as she thought of all the complications in connection with Harry Durant, of which she believed Deb to be totally ignorant.

"One meeting!" cried Deb. "Bless you, madame, why, I have known the gentleman ever so long. He was a pertikler friend of mine before ever I saw the school."

So, so; the revelations were becoming interesting, and Deb might be made even more useful than Mrs. Fitzalan had at first imagined.

"If you were to become a great singer and marry Mr. Durant at the end, would it not be like a fairy tale? But still it might come about," she said holding out the idea to the girl as a sort of bait to make her talk. "Come and tell me, child, where you first met this wonderful Mr. Durant."

"Oh, he don't think of me—he is all for Lady Fleming, I tell you—not, for the matter of that, that I look forward to anything so great as the likes of he." And she followed Mrs. Fitzalan, who led her into the little front parlour away from the other listening scholars.

"So the opera was charming? Tell me everything, Deb, from the very beginning; I am so interested."

Thus encouraged, Deb talked on rapidly and told Mrs. Fitzalan a good many things she was anxious to know about Cicely's home life; though it was no slight trial of patience to be compelled to listen to the masses of irrelevant

matter in which the information was wrapped. But Mrs. Fitzalan showed no outward signs of irritation. She was an adept in the art of cross-questioning without seeming desirous of gaining knowledge; and Deb, loyal, true as steel as she would fain have been to both Cicely and Harry Durant, was plastic as wax in the hands of this clever woman of the world, who had elected to patronize and flatter her. Yes, there was little doubt that Cicely and Harry Durant met on terms of warm intimacy. So far her scheme of vengeance was working ably: she had but to remain hidden a while longer in the German's house, with Deb for a scout to bring news from the enemy's camp, and the moment must soon arrive when she would be able to utilize her information for her own advantage. Poor little Deb! she would have thrown herself from the nearest bridge into the river rather than have done the work chalked out for her, if she had only suspected the tool she was at the will of this able manipulator. As it was, however, she was let off more easily than Mrs. Fitzalan had intended, for the resistless fate which governs so many lives intervened and brought affairs to a crisis. An "anticlimax," the Grey Widow would herself have called it, for events were by no means ripe enough as yet to please her insatiable longing for revenge and excitement.

The embodiment of fate's decrees in the present instance was none other than Algy Duncombe, against whom Mrs. Fitzalan stumbled one day soon after her conversation with Deb. She was wandering slowly along a street in by no means the most fashionable part of London. Fancying herself safe from recognition there, she had raised the grey veil she wore—for her eyes, she said—and, inhaling the soft summer air, was lost in a brown study as she sauntered on; nor did Algy's jovial tones recall her pleasurably from her dream as she heard them.

"Well met, Mrs. Fitzalan. All your friends have been wondering what could have become of you; but I never thought to come across you here."

There was always a sort of impertinent swagger about Algy's manner to the widow which "riled" her, the more especially as she could not fail to notice in how much it differed from that which he assumed to all the other ladies of his acquaintance.

"I scarcely knew that my movements were a matter of interest to Mr. Algy Duncombe," she said, haughtily.

"Since Mrs. Fitzalan has closed her Paris doors Society's world has put on mourning. Why should I be excluded from the general lamentation?"

"Pooh! don't talk nonsense. Why should not I come to London for a little change as well as other people?"

"Why not indeed?" But he looked round impertinently, with a gesture which seemed to say that those out-of-the-way precincts were scarcely the fashionable widow's haunts.

She noted his meaning and coloured. Even Mrs. Fitzalan was not always on her guard.

"I have a sick friend in these parts and have been to see her."

"Ah, how good of you! But you were always good. And when is your more healthy acquaintance to have the privilege of your smiles? I dined with the Flemings last night, and strange to relate, we were all talking of you--wondering why you never wrote. I scarcely thought I should be the first to give news of the truant."

"I have been in London so short a time, and came at once on the duty which brought me to England. It is over now; my poor friend is dead, and I shall have leisure to bestow my thoughts on those who are yet living."

Algy Duncombe, unbeliever that he was, did not give the slightest credence to this story of a dying friend, but he tried to look regretful while he assured Mrs. Fitzalan that he would have the greatest pleasure in escorting her home.

"Pray don't let me take you out of your way, Mr.

Duncombe. Women of my age and lone position are compelled at times to walk alone and find their way through life for themselves. I am going to Bond Street, to a shop. It is a long way from here."

"A mile and a half at least; but, curiously enough, our roads lie together. I am bound for my club."

Here was a fresh complication, and by no means an agreeable one. Mrs. Fitzalan was fully aware that Algy was a sifter. He was not likely to let her off at all easily, and it would be utter destruction if he discovered that she was residing at the old German's.

"*Que faire, mon Dieu, que faire ?*" was the one question she asked herself during their walk, listening to and answering meanwhile dreamily the thousand and one nothings, about which he rattled on, and which would certainly have interested her, bearing gossip relation as they did to the lives of many of her friends, if she had not been so terribly preoccupied. On a sudden, as though a fresh life had awakened in her, she began to talk as gaily as he did. She had decided on her plan of action. One of fortune's stakes for which she was so fond of throwing lay before her now. She reached the Bond Street shop, and went in to make her purchases. Algy Duncombe, as she felt sure would prove the case, still pertinaciously at her elbow. She ordered her parcel to be sent to an hotel in Dover Street, and then, still accompanied by her shadow Algy, went there herself. It was the hotel at which she had arrived on reaching London, and where she had fortunately left a portion of her luggage, as being too ponderous to take to the old German's shabby quarters. Now she might surely dismiss her attendant squire. He could not dare to intrude upon her privacy without being invited.

"Good morning, Mr. Duncombe. Thank you for your escort. I will not ask you to come in, as I am very tired. When you are passing pay me a visit."

Yes, the fact of her being in London once known to Algy Duncombe, she could play the incognita no longer. She went upstairs, took at once the rooms she had previously had, sent for her boxes from the store-room, despatched a message to Gretchen saying the illness of a friend would call her away for a few days, and before night was thoroughly installed in her new abode. Sudden transitions were as life to Mrs. Fitzalan; they seemed to feed the latent excitement of which few, judging from her calm exterior, would have believed her nature to be capable. She put on one of her prettiest soft grey toilettes, and sat by the open window resting. The room she had selected for her sitting-room was a back one. She could think out her plans and shape her ideas more readily away from the fret and tear of the busy street.

But quietude did not altogether reign even here on that particular afternoon. A sound of music and of many voices fell on her ear. She rose and looked out of the window. In a house close by there were assembled many guests, and a large morning party was in full swing. Mrs. Fitzalan stood out on the leads on to which the window opened. She could see every one in the adjoining drawing-room, occasionally even hear the words they uttered. Hidden from view by the side of a projection in the wall, it amused her to watch these people, especially as every now and then a familiar form flitted by; and she was fitting in the various flirtations, watching the various phases of "spooniness" on the different faces, with an interest she had never had time for at her own reunions, when suddenly a voice she knew full well said, hurriedly—

"The reports are totally without foundation. My God! how fond people are of damning a fair fame!"

Harry Durant was standing on the balcony, not ten yards from Mrs. Fitzalan, who drew her skirts more closely round her, and remained motionless behind the projection.

"You will forgive me for telling you this, Mr. Durant. The actors in a drama are sometimes the last to hear the criticisms. I am a straightforward, blunt woman, you know, and I have grown fond of the child."

Mrs. Fitzalan did not know the speaker, but she strained her ears to catch Mr. Durant's answer.

"Forgive you! I thank you with all my heart, and shall only too gladly follow your advice. Perhaps it were wisest if I went abroad at once."

"No," she replied, decisively, "live it down here. There can be no harm done if you are on your guard, for she, I feel sure, has no warmer feeling than regard for you."

"Thank God," he murmured.

"What are you two concocting out there? Lady Susan, I have been looking for you everywhere." And Cicely, radiant in smiles, tripped out on to the pretty balcony, and seated herself among the flowers. She had grown so cheerful and gay of late that Lady Susan must be forgiven the mistake she had just made in assuring Harry Durant there was no danger. When even he himself had been deceived by Cicely's manner, why should another be wiser? They looked guilty, however, these two who had been talking together so intimately.

"Well," went on Cicely, "tell me what it is you are arranging—a pleasant surprise of some sort for me, I hope, for I am horribly disgusted just at this moment. Fancy, Sir Hubert has actually gone to dine with some fusty old lawyer, down I don't know where!—says he must—it is a matter of business—and I am left all alone! Come, both of you, and dine with me—do."

"Impossible; I have fifty engagements," cried Lady Susan.

"And Mr. Durant has a hundred—he always has," said Cicely, laughing. "Well, never mind; I won't be moped. I'll go to the Art School and fetch Deb."

"What an escape!" was the mental ejaculation behind the projection.

"Nonsense, Cis. You must give up philandering with Deb—it won't pay," remarked Lady Sue. "Ask Rose Bertrand to spend the evening with you. She is much more fit to be your companion."

All the colour faded out of Cicely's face.

"Thank you, Lady Sue," she said, quietly, "I prefer choosing my own companions. I dare say I shall do very well with a book; or, if I am very much bored, I'll take a dose of chloral and go to bed."

"A dose of chloral, Lady Fleming! Who has recommended such a thing?" exclaimed Harry Durant, aghast.

"Oh, Doctor James gave me some after that accident in the Park, to quiet my nerves, he said. You can't think how jolly it is. I have often taken it since."

"Often taken it since? Why, it is only a week since the smash," suggested Lady Sue.

"A good many things happen in a week," retorted her younger companion, laughing. "'A life may be made or marred in a few hours'—so I read in a book this morning. You see a week is an age."

"You are growing very wise, Cis; too wise, I am afraid; but give up chloral, child, or the weeks of your life will merge into days."

Cicely laughed.

"I am sorry I interrupted your *tête-à-tête*," she said, "for you are both very disagreeable. As for Mr. Durant, I am sure he has eaten something which has disagreed with him, he looks so sour. I am going home. Ta-ta."

"Shall I see you to your carriage, Lady Fleming?"

"If you like, and the whole thing does not bother you too much. You don't seem capable of taking much trouble to-day."

Another moment and they had all passed back into the

room, and Mrs. Fitzalan was able to glide noiselessly from behind her projection.

"So, so—Cicely had taken to acting; and neither Mr. Durant nor this new friend of hers saw anything in her manner beyond the mere effervescence and exuberance of girlish spirits. It was well; but how would it all end?"

Once more Mrs. Fitzalan sat down in her chair by the window and thought.

"This Lady Susan had deemed it necessary to warn him. Then Mr. Durant's intimacy with Lady Fleming must be already becoming the subject of town talk. Ah! she had gained much valuable information to-day. The meeting with Algy Duncombe was not altogether so ill-timed as she had thought." And before the sound of the music and the hum of voices had died away in the adjoining house, Mrs. Fitzalan had rattled the dice and prepared for the next throw. She was evidently in luck just now, and would have bet heavily on double sixes. Had she not watched Durant as Cicely sat among the flowers? His nervous power was shaken, and his feeble efforts at casting for a heavy stake would be wanting in the dash that luck demands.

Yes, this was the identical moment for action; only she regretted she had not yet been successful in obtaining Miss Wilson's address. How could she for an instant have calculated on the fact of Deb's knowledge on the subject? Yet so it is in life—how near we are not unfrequently to a desired object even when we the least know aught of its proximity!

And Harry Durant conducted Cicely to her carriage, and saw her depart with a heavy heart, and a deeper furrow of care on the brow, which had grown wrinkled and aged of late; while she waved him a gay farewell and looked as smiling and careless as a young thing should—till she was out of sight. Then she lay back in the corner of her brougham, utterly regardless of smashing her

gossamer bonnet, and, closing her eyes, sat motionless for awhile, till the tears slowly trickled down her cheeks. She did not seek to repress them; they might help to remove the dreadful pressure which weighed upon her heart and tightened it as with a cord. It was well that Sir Hubert was out when she reached Campden Hill, or even he, blind though he was to exterior symptoms, must have noted the change. Not an hour ago the gayest of the gay, now she lay exhausted on the sofa in her bedroom. Pale and with tear-stained face, she gave herself up for awhile to the utter misery of despair.

"She did not want any dinner—only to be left alone in quietude and darkness," she said—"a most intolerable headache had come, on," from the heat, she supposed.

So the maid gave her some strong tea and left her, according to her wishes, to battle in solitude with those powerful feelings which would not be wholly crushed, though the recollection of that solemn promise to be "faithful and true" never seemed to forsake her even for a moment.

CHAPTER XXX.

"FOR CICELY'S SAKE."

BRUSHES here, mahl-sticks there, easels standing about, unfinished pictures and models everywhere—such is the aspect of Harry Durant's *atelier*. Not at any time a tidy or over-careful man, his sanctum can never be designated as prim; but now, from recent disuse, it has acquired a more than ordinary amount of dust, which rises like a mist and thickens the atmosphere, as, in a loose brown-holland blouse he has donned for the occasion, Mr. Durant begins

kicking this thing out of his way in one direction, throwing another there; in fact, with an amount of energy which betokens the storm raging within, he is preparing fiercely for active work. Virtuoso no longer, the artist must replace the town idler, and work, hard honest work, drive away the demon which has of late haunted his path. He will go to Campden Hill Villa no more, but, absorbed in the production of some great picture which shall bring him fame for aye, he will forget the very existence of Cicely, and set aside for ever the thousand worries and annoyances to which his acquaintance with her has given birth. It is a brave resolution, put into practice with an activity of purpose worthy of Harry Durant's honest loyal nature. "True to the end" is the motto of his race, and he will not belie the traditions of his kith and kin. A short half-hour, and the studio has assumed some appearance of readiness for future triumphs. But this canvas is too small, that is badly mounted; then the light is all wrong. Another half-hour passes in remedying these evils, when a still greater trouble arises—no congenial subject presents itself to his mind. A dozen sketches are looked over which on former occasions have been thought worth a consideration for development, but they are now thrown aside with something like an oath; and, taking up some crayons, with a sort of desperate dash Mr. Durant begins to work as though his life depended on rapid execution.

As the bold strokes assume form and life under the rapid touch of his pencil, you may well ask if it is for this he has forsworn the gay world and immured himself within the four walls of the large back room he calls an *atelier*. Cicely's face as he had first seen it, with the long hair hanging carelessly about—the large sun-hat thrown back, lest its brim should conceal the lustre of her eyes—appears ere long in outline on the canvas, and, like a man in a dream, Harry Durant works on, as though by the touch of his genius he would fain perpetuate those features for all

time. Morning has deepened into day, noontide waned into twilight, and still Harry Durant stands before his easel; but the gathering shadows at last remind him that he must rest from his labours, and he drops back at a little distance, as though to take in the effect of his work in its entirety while there is yet sufficient light in the sky.

A knock at the door almost startles him. It is the first sound from the outer world he has heard since he rose at daybreak with the sweeps. It may be a suffusion of blood which mounts to his forehead, or it may be the last ray of light gleaming in at the large window which kindles the seeming glow, but, whatever the cause, Mr. Durant snatches the picture from its position and stands it with its face to the wall; then he opens the door.

"A lady is asking for you, sir. She will take no denial; so I just showed her into the parlour," grumbled the landlady, who was a stickler for propriety and objected to lady visitors.

"What is her name?" asked Mr. Durant.

"Just as if I asked her! If you want to know you had best come and find out for yourself." And the old woman trotted off, muttering to herself about the lives some people lead.

"Why, if there wasn't the breakfast as had stood there the whole blessed day, and not a sup or bite had the gentleman took!"

Mr. Durant passed his fingers through his hair and beard, and did not change the blouse which he knew was rather becoming than otherwise—vanity, it may thus be observed, was not wholly extinct within him—and then he passed on into his sitting-room, wondering to himself who this lady could be. She was dressed in black and closely veiled. He bowed stiffly and began a sort of formal "To what am I indebted?"

She threw up her veil.

"Mrs. Fitzalan!"

"The last person you expected or wished to see," she said, sneeringly.

"Certainly the last person I expected—here."

"Desperate cases require desperate ventures, Mr. Durant. You probably would not have come to me had I sent for you."

"To bring you to England it must indeed be a desperate case," he said with a light laugh. "In what can I assist you?"

Mrs. Fitzalan coloured angrily, for woman though she was, she failed to detect the restless anxiety which lay beneath the carelessness of his tone.

"Are you so very safe and assured in all your enterprises that you have never any cause to fear?" she asked, mockingly.

"I scarcely know your meaning in the present instance. Certainly the good folks tell us we are all dependent on each other in this world. Am I to understand that Mrs. Fitzalan has come here to proffer help to me?" And he laughed.

"You are more in my power than you think, Harry Durant. It were well, perhaps, not to push me too far."

"My dear lady, I have left you in the most unreserved possession of your perfect freedom. For weeks past neither by sign nor sound have I allowed you to infer that I even live. The reason of this present complaint is a riddle to me."

"Yet you hold proofs."

He bowed.

"These proofs must be given up to me forthwith."

"How so? The strongest proof I have against you is the word of a truthful man—if I choose to speak. Writing is easily burnt, but the tongue——"

"Must be silenced," she said, peremptorily.

"*Must*? Since when has Mrs. Fitzalan learnt to be dictatorial?"

"Since Cicely married Sir Hubert Fleming and Mr. Durant was known to be her lover."

"Woman, you lie!" he said, fiercely. "How dare you twit me thus?"

It was Mrs. Fitzalan's turn to laugh.

"You did not think we were so nearly quits, Harry Durant. I dare say, after a little more haggling and a farther waste of words, we shall be able to square our accounts."

He looked at her fiercely for a moment; then he said, bitterly—

"Heaven only knows how I despise you."

"I am aware of it—fully aware of it, or I should not be here to-day." And she gave him look for look. "Yet what I am is your work."

"My work? Come, this is past a joke."

"Listen to me, Harry Durant, for the last time, I hope, that we shall meet on earth. As a girl, years ago, before we either of us knew what intrigue meant, you loved me."

"It really is so long ago—don't let us get into maudlin sentimentality, for heaven's sake."

"Silence—do not interrupt me. You loved me then, or at all events, with man's usual disregard for the feelings of others, you taught me to believe you did."

"I did love you, Margaret Denham; should have loved you always, if——"

"If I had not sacrificed too much for you," she said, promptly.

"Nay, the sacrifice to which you allude rather strengthens than weakens the tie. I should never have been base enough to desert my love for you if you yourself had not placed an insuperable barrier between us."

"And that barrier?" she said, gasping almost for breath.

"Was the man whose name you now bear."

She clutched the back of a chair to save herself from falling, and stood looking at him for some seconds.

"My God!" she said at last, "this, then, is Thy punishment for sin! You, Harry, you thought and believed *that*—and I, who fancied that you knew the truth! Oh, Misery, I never thought to stare so closely in your face!" And, her hand pressed on her heart, she rocked herself to and fro, but did not weep.

Mr. Durant walked away to the window. Like all men, he hated a scene, and he had no belief in Mrs. Fitzalan save as a consummate actress. Finding, however, that she did not speak again, but only stood there as one who had lost her way in a vast wilderness, he went up to her and took her kindly by the hand as he said, almost tenderly, "My dear Margaret, let bygones be bygones. What can it avail us, now we are both creeping into the "sere and yellow leaf" of life, to talk over our youthful loves? They can but call up bitter memories."

"Our bygone youthful loves—would to God I had died when they did! And you, who thought me false, Harry, will you not believe me when I tell you that never for an hour have I been false to my old love for you—never will till the end comes?"

He shrugged his shoulders, unconvinced of her sincerity, notwithstanding her assurances, and perhaps scarcely caring whether she spoke the truth or not.

"I have never been in America," he said, "but I scarcely think that it is easier there to acquire a name and fortune than it would be here."

"And Cicely," she said, "do you believe——"

"I do not wish to bring Lady Fleming into the discussion," he answered, haughtily. "Thank God, she is provided for and happy."

"Happy!"—and Mrs. Fitzalan's unnatural laugh echoed through the room—"happy! Will women ever be happy as long as there are men on earth? So Cicely's happiness is your chief care now?"

"You once promised that it should be yours. But really Mrs. Fitzalan, it seems to me very unnecessary for us to discuss these matters."

"They are the whole point of my visit here to-day. You thought I was in Paris, where I probably should have remained quietly, if you had not crossed my path again and awakened old memories; but once roused, a jealous woman never rests. For the last three weeks I have been in London, dogging your steps. I am not ashamed to own it—you despise me already, you know. I have watched your ripening love for Cicely—saw you lift her from her carriage in the Park—heard of you by her side at the opera—lingering about her home life—ay, Harry Durant, I know it all; yet you are counted by the world honest and upright and honourable in your dealings, and have Cicely's happiness and welfare ever before your mind."

"Silence, woman; you have no right to tax my patience thus—beware lest you exhaust it."

"Ah! did I not say we should cry quits at last? Give me the proofs you hold against me—swear that I shall pass the remainder of my life without a word being uttered by you which shall reveal to the world that I am other than I appear, or rest fully assured, Mr. Durant, that in that very hour I will sow dissension in Lady Fleming's home, by letting Sir Hubert know how matters stand between you."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my good Margaret, you cannot do this—there is nothing to tell." And he spoke hurriedly, though he sought to appear simply amused.

"Nothing to tell, Harry Durant? There is more to tell than you would care to have known, I fancy; and I repeat, leave me unmolested, or fear the consequences."

"It scarcely seems to me that I have particularly interfered with you. Quietly absorbed as I have been for the last few hours in my painting, I was not even thinking of you, much less harbouring the intention of making the story of your past life a public scandal."

"Yet to accomplish your ends you have threatened me twice," she answered. "To serve mine I have come here now. Are these threats of yours to be put into execution, or will you accept the compromise?"

"If I had really wished to injure you I should have done it long ago. I understand nothing about a compromise," he replied.

She laughed mockingly.

"Oh, pray do not commit yourself, but give me the papers you procured from Miss Wilson." And, taking a fusee from a box on the mantelshelf, she lighted it.

"You are not going to burn them, Mrs. Fitzalan? For Cicely's sake they must be kept."

She threw the light away with a jerk.

"So be it—for Cicely's sake they shall be kept. We float together on a rapid current, Lady Fleming and I; when I sink, strange that naught will save her!" And her laugh sounded so mockingly as it echoed through the room in the half-darkness, that it seemed as though a hundred little demons were let loose to torture and to harass.

Harry Durant was no coward, yet what could he do? Cicely's happiness, Cicely's reputation were in this woman's hands. He went to his desk without speaking and took out the papers, she watching him the while with those steel-grey eyes of hers which, like a cat's, saw clearest in the gloom.

"They are very safe in my possession," he said, striving to appear perfectly calm and indifferent. "I cannot imagine why you want to disturb them."

"They will be safer in mine," she answered, shortly, "and having them may prevent a tiresome pilgrimage to Campden Hill."

He threw them to her with a sneer. In reality it mattered little to Harry Durant what the world thought or did not think of Mrs. Fitzalan, only Cicely must be sheltered, if possible, from evil tongues.

Once more she lighted a fusee, and as she watched the paper burn, her face as the light shone over it would have awakened Mr. Durant's artistic spirit had his mind not been dwelling too deeply on other matters.

Once more the room was wrapped in darkness, and Mrs. Fitzalan spoke—

"Now it is word for word, tongue for tongue, between us, Harry Durant. When you tell your tale mine will follow quickly."

"For mercy's sake cease this nonsense," he said, irritatedly. "I wish to say nothing whatever about you. Go back to Paris, and let us hear no more about the matter. Only remember Miss Wilson is still alive."

"M. Barbier has undertaken to silence her. She, I imagine, will only prove a trifle costly; but that is his affair."

"M. Barbier—so he is still one of your friends?" said Mr. Durant, with a sneer.

"Say rather I am his slave. One false step sometimes leaves us for ever branded by the marks of the balustrades to which we have clung for help."

"Just so. It is not always easy to recover your balance when once you have fallen."

"For a woman it is impossible," she said, bitterly; "to you men only is it permitted to make the laws and break them as you will."

"Ah, well, under the new dispensation, when women's rights are established, we shall have to knock under," he answered, lightly.

The tone angered her—she was in no mood for playful talk with him.

"Good-night, Harry Durant," she said somewhat abruptly. "The chances are we shall meet no more on earth; the past between us has been too bitter to yield pleasure in the future—only, for Cicely's sake, beware. Even without my interference that false step of which we

spoke just now may be taken—that one step, you know, which brings inevitable ruin—to a woman!”

She was gone, without a handshake or a word from him, and yet in the “morning march of life” these two had been what the world calls lovers.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SWINTON HALL.

BACK again at Swinton. The forest trees waving as of yore; the water by the old mill rushing unceasingly; animal and vegetable life as it was wont to be, the very same cows and horses basking in the sun. All familiar, well-remembered, and unchanged—all save that inner self which forms the great essential as one views a picture.

Cicely is standing on the lawn in front of Swinton Hall. Mrs. Bertrand's invitation has been given and accepted, and Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming are among the guests who have just arrived to grace with their presence some festivities which are to awaken the echoes round the old place, stilled as they have been to the tones of merriment and joy while the family has been abroad these two years past. Cicely looks round her musingly; she has cast off for the moment those dashing spirits she had assumed of late in London, and is once more dreaming of her happy childhood, before “that dreadful time had come since when she had known real happiness no more.”

“A whole sovereign for your thoughts, Cis,” said Sir Hubert, going up to her.

She shook herself awake with an effort.

“I was not thinking, only dreaming—you forget I was a little girl here once.”

"And was that such a very melancholy time, that you dwell on it thus sadly, my love?"

"Melancholy? Oh, no; it was all too bright—far brighter than——" She marked the pained look her words occasioned. "What am I saying, Sir Hubert? I believe I must have been thinking of grand-dad's death when you disturbed my reverie. Ah, there is Mr. Burke—dear, good Mr. Burke!" And she rushed away from her husband to meet the vicar, who was coming across the lawn.

"My child—my little Cis—come back a very fine lady!" And the vicar sought vainly to conceal the tone of pathos which would in spite of his efforts manifest itself in his voice.

"Owing to all your care and all your instructions," she replied. "Oh! Mr. Burke, I never thanked you half enough for all you taught me and did for me. If I had not been horribly ungrateful I should never have left Swinton."

"Since your going has turned out so well there is nothing to regret, child. I was somewhat lonely after you left, I must confess, but it is a blessing to see you come back looking so bonny."

"You never wrote me one line when I married. It was too unkind of you. I thought you disapproved," she said, shaking her finger at him.

"My approval had naught to do with the matter. Durant had elected himself your guardian—what did he think?"

"Oh, he—well, I suppose he did not trouble himself about it, as long as I was pleased."

"I always thought you would marry Durant. How came the change in the programme?"

Cicely's face was like a scarlet peony.

"Ask Mrs. Fitzalan—she knows best. In France young girls are not allowed to have opinions. Besides,

you are quite mistaken if you imagine Mr. Durant ever wanted to marry me. He quite approves of Sir Hubert."

"And you, Cis?" he asked, for he scarcely liked the flippant way in which she answered.

"Oh, I am very fond of my husband, of course, as a good wife should be. Did not you instil high principles into me in old days? See, there is Sir Hubert, wondering at our long *tête-à-tête*—come and be introduced."

"No, this could never be little Cicely; and if so, why this rapid change? What could have occurred that in so short a space of time the coy shyness of the girl should give place to the off-hand readiness of the woman?" And as Mr. Burke made Sir Hubert's acquaintance he failed still more to discover a reason. If he had been a dashing chaffy young Guardsman she might have caught the vein of his humour and had the dew dashed off her petals; but this reserved, intellectual, middle-aged man to have transformed her into what she now was—it was incredible. If Mr. Burke had had any means of ascertaining the truth, he might have learnt that Sir Hubert was as perplexed at the change in his wife as the vicar could be. The fast manners of fashionable life were horribly catching, he was afraid; and perhaps Algy was right—Lady Susan's influence was not the most refining. It was a pity, but what could he do? Cicely must march with the times—anything was better than that she should look moped and bored.

Wiseacres as men think themselves, with their causes and effects, what miserably blind dupes they not unfrequently are! To a certain degree, perhaps, he was right, though, in his surmises. She had caught dash and learnt repartee from Lady Susan and Algy Duncombe, but without that motive which Sir Hubert failed to fathom, she would never have dreamed of utilizing the knowledge she had acquired. Since the party in Dover Street a whole month had passed, and she had not again seen Harry

Durant. What had become of him she knew not. Once since then Sir Hubert had mentioned having met him at a lawyer's chambers in London, but now even he seemed ignorant of his movements. True, every one just at that time of year was moving about, which might account for his absence and silence, yet Cicely longed to see the dear familiar face again, and drooped at times almost perceptibly under the armour of chaff and merry nonsense in which she sought so earnestly to encase herself. What should she do at Swinton, how bear up under Mrs. Bertrand's inquisitorial glances? Everything was so reminding, so painful, and neither Algy Duncombe nor Lady Susan would be there to help her with their merry talk. Algy of course, was never invited since he had chosen to fall in love with May, and Lady Susan's acquaintance with Mrs. Bertrand was very slight, and one from which she shrank intuitively for herself and feared for Cicely.

"Mind you don't come to grief, little one. That woman's cunning is as deep as a well, and I don't believe she loves you. What Sir Hubert wants to take you there for I can't think, nor, in fact, why she has asked you," had been Lady Sue's remark when she bid Cicely farewell.

"Oh, I do so want to see dear old Swinton again."

"All right, and very sentimental and wise, I dare say, if you don't have to pay for it."

Cicely had only been four and twenty hours at Swinton, and was already beginning to pay for coming, if the utterly miserable state of her feelings was the coin in which payment was to be made. The day before, at the sight of the old lodge, she had cried till she was almost ashamed of appearing among the guests at dinner, and Sir Hubert had threatened to take her back forthwith to Campden Hill. No, it was evident she must battle with sentiment and laugh down despair—she would be very happy in the end, no doubt. Mrs. Fitzalan had long ago told her that feelings were "all nonsense."

"Play lawn tennis—of course she would. She had not had much practice, so she must be forgiven if she played badly."

And as once Cicely had been deemed the merriest spirit on the village green, so now Lady Fleming was the merriest spirit on Swinton lawn, and the joyous party of young people there assembled laughed again and again at her badinage and her jokes. To-morrow would be the first of September, so it was the last day when the gentlemen might be expected to idle in the ladies' presence, and every one seemed to be making the most of the occasion. Tea was at last brought out under the trees; and, leaving their game for a while, they all grouped themselves round the table where Rose was the presiding deity. More "guns" were to arrive by a train nearly due, and many were the speculations as to what they would be like, for Rose and May out of sheer fun declined to say who the fresh guests were whom they were expecting. At last the sound of carriage wheels is heard in the distance, and after a few minutes two men emerge from a side garden-door on to the lawn—Harry Durant and Mr. Seton.

"Oh, Lady Fleming, I hope you have not spoiled your dress—I am afraid I touched your cup."

"Well, you *are* very awkward; but I think I upset the tea myself, so I'll forgive you. There is not much harm done—my dress will wash."

And in flapping the tea off her skirt with her handkerchief Cicely's scarlet face escaped observation, while she inwardly thanked the young Oxonian who, all unwittingly, had come to her friendly succour. But if Cicely's heart beat so wildly that she could almost hear its throbs at this unexpected meeting with Mr. Durant, what his feelings were it is almost hopeless to depict.

Heaven only knew how carefully he had kept out of her way of late, and now to meet her here—it was a bad turn he had not deserved from fate. His uncle, in asking

him to come and shoot, had spoken of a man's party only; never for a moment had it occurred to him that the Flemings were likely to be present, or very certainly all the partridges in England would not have lured him. Sir Hubert greeted him most warmly, but Lady Fleming shook hands in silence. Chaff failed her, and a serious reception would have been madness.

Ah, Lady Susan little guessed how truly necessary had been her injunction to be careful! If only she were there to help her now!

"Thank goodness we shall be shooting all day to-morrow, and the next morning I shall have letters imperatively recalling me to town," Harry Durant had said to himself when he thought the matter over as he dressed for dinner, for up to this time Cicely had never addressed him, nor by word nor sign, save by that handshake, testified that she was aware he was near her. Truth to tell, she dared not trust herself—the startle his sudden appearance had given her had so upset her nerves that they were scarcely amenable to control. She must go to her room, take a "calming draught," and school herself before she could reassume the bantering manner which had proved so successful of late.

Another hour and they had all assembled in the drawing-room awaiting the announcement of dinner. Mr. Burke had been asked to dine; so there was another pair of eyes from whose gaze Cicely intuitively shrank. And yet she had done no wrong; was, on the contrary, heartily and resolutely striving to do right, but fate was indeed against her too; at least, so she thought when Mr. Durant, by the desire of his aunt, gave her his arm and conducted her across the large hall into the dining-room. Cicely talked and laughed so freely and unreservedly that Mrs. Bertrand, ever ready to find fault, set her down as an exceedingly "forward young person for one who had been so recently elevated to her present position." Even she, inimical

though she was, failed utterly to detect any symptoms of deeper feeling than mere acquaintance demands between the two whom she had placed together at the table, because perchance a rumour of past fondness had reached her, and she wished with her usual inquiring habits, to discover the truth. Harry Durant, though wishing himself ten thousand miles away, took his cue from Cicely, and talked as gaily as she did. Yet how could they enjoy each other's society under the artillery of all those eyes watching for one little trip—trembling, too, in their hearts lest either should betray to the other any portion of those desperate inward workings? They chatted on on general subjects, steering very clear of all topics of personal interest—the old days at Swinton, Peter's death, the week spent at the vicarage, were vividly in both their minds, though they were alluded to by neither. But the dinner was got through, as similar dinners have been got through before. Mr. Burke, from the fact of its being so new to him, was perhaps the only individual who was set wondering at Cicely's manner. The good, unsophisticated vicar, buried in his country parish, failed totally to comprehend how a few month's contact with the great outer world could so thoroughly and utterly change a woman.

"She is no longer the child she was when Peter died, eh, Harry? What does it all mean?" he said to Mr. Durant, when, the ladies having left the room, the two men found themselves side by side.

"Do you think the world stands still while you are dreaming here at Swinton?" asked Harry, laughing.

"No, not exactly; but why should Cicely change? Rose and May Bertrand have come back much as they left."

"Milk-and-water fools, both of them!"

"So, so—then that marriage is not arranged yet?"

"And never will be on this side of time. Come, Burke, let us find a more amusing topic of conversation than

matrimony. Divorce savours much more of the spirit of the day."

"It is an evil day, my boy, as even I can hear from the stray bits of gossip that reach Swinton. You know I always disapproved most highly of that girl being taken away from this quiet village and plunged into the vortex of the great world. I hope she is as happy as she appears; but I am inclined to doubt it."

"Of all the hideous sounds of woe,
Worse than the screech-owl and the blast,
Is that portentous one, 'I told you so,'"

answered Durant, quoting Byron, with a gay laugh. "She has a husband to take care of her—what more can you and I have to do with the matter?"

"Pooh, no one but Margaret Denham—for I will not call her by that other name—would have married bright little Cis to such a Don Quixote as that."

"He is a very good fellow, and a great friend of mine, though perhaps, as you say, rather a melancholy bird for Cicely; but I believe she likes him."

Mr. Burke shrugged his shoulders. He was not at all convinced of that fact.

"If so it is well," he answered; "though what possessed you to insist on the girl being sent to that woman I cannot conceive. If I had not thought you intended to marry her yourself, and had therefore a right to interfere, I should far more strenuously have opposed the scheme."

Mr. Durant knitted his brow angrily and took a peach from a dish in front of him.

"I don't think we either of us are entirely *au courant* with Margaret Denham's history," he said, after a short pause. "But this is not the place to discuss it. We must have a talk and compare notes. If we had both been less reticent in the past, perhaps things would not have turned out as they are now."

"I wrote to her more than six weeks ago, telling her

I had those papers we found in the lodge which were marked to be given to her a year after the old man's death, but she has taken no notice of my letter."

"Ah, I had forgotten all about them—she interests me but little. I have seen her, though, in London since that. She never mentioned having heard from you."

"No, of course not—she was always secretive. Does the husband know who Cicely really is?"

"He knows, of course, what Mrs. Fitzalan chose to tell him. I had nothing to do with the marriage—was laid up with a broken leg in England at the time."

"So, so, so—now I am beginning to see." And a sudden light stole over the vicar's face.

"Come along, let us join the ladies and put off confidential talk till another time. I'll come and dine with you in a day or two, if you will have me. They have lots of men here—they won't miss me for once."

"With pleasure, my dear boy. I didn't ask you because I thought your aunt would scold me for it."

"Oh, bother take her!"

Cicely was sitting apart from the others as they entered the room—she was turning over a large portfolio of drawings, looking very pale and listless. She had fought bravely all through dinner, and the effort had well-nigh expended her nervous strength. Constant tension had rendered these delicate organs somewhat troublesome of late. It was the vicar's privilege to talk to her to-night; the child he had taught from infancy, and in whom he had taken so large a share of paternal interest, was going to devote herself to a good half-hour's chat with the worthy man. Yet woe to Cicely—the acting must recommence, she could not be simple, honest, and true, as her nature prompted—there were so many things she must not say, so many old memories to which she dared not allude. Once she had contemplated telling him everything; but, good kind man through he was, what could he do to help? To drag

another individual into the plot would only be to increase its intricacies. No, she must work her way through the labyrinth as best she could alone, and trust to heaven for guidance and support. So she made the best of her talk with the vicar—asked after all the old village friends from whom her life had now become so thoroughly estranged, and kept as clear as she could of reference to the vicissitudes through which she had passed since she left. During their conversation a servant had called Mr. Durant from the room, a circumstance which produced no especial comment, till some one at last observed that both he and Sir Hubert had been absent for a considerable time.

"Looking after their guns," suggested one of the party. "Durant used to be a crack shot before he went sentimentalizing in Italy."

"But Sir Hubert does not shoot at all," said Cicely, "and has not even brought a gun."

"Then perhaps they have gone for a walk—it is a very fine night. We ought all of us to be out. Come and look at the moon, Miss Rose." And Rose Bertrand and Mr. Seton stepped out on to the terrace.

Mrs. Bertrand had not yet discovered how much moonshine there was about Mr. Seton's prospects.

At this moment Harry Durant came back, and went straight up to Cicely.

"Your husband is not quite well, Lady Fleming; he would like you to come to him."

"Ah, I will go directly—Sir Hubert is often ill. Did he ask you to fetch me?"

"He is in his dressing-room—his servant is with him. Shall I come with you?"

"Just as you like." And she passed quickly out of the room.

No, verily she did not love Sir Hubert. The light manner told its own tale. Harry Durant followed her, merely saying hurriedly as he did so—

"Fleming is very seriously ill. I have sent for the nearest doctor, and telegraphed to town for his own physician."

That she would be shocked and awed when she saw him Durant knew her kind heart too well to doubt, even if she had no latent affection for him—which he both hoped and believed she had; at all events, he would not leave her to face the ordeal alone.

On the sofa in the dressing-room lay Sir Hubert. He had been struck down by a sudden fit, and was labouring back to consciousness as she entered.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MISS WILSON.

"It is very well to sing, and to be with swells, and to get on in life generally, but please, Meister, without seeming ungrateful, I should like to be back at my broom."

Old Wurzel's face was a study as Deb rushed into the music-room one morning and uttered these words.

"Back to your broom, *Kind!* *Gott im Himmel!* what for you go back to your broom? Ah, the Herr, then, was right—he say let the child be."

"That's just it; it's because of the gentleman. If I had stuck to my broom I never should have done no harm to he."

"Harm, Deb? What mean you, *Kind*, what mean you?"

"Well, it's all along of that French party," cried Deb, who, although she had begun to speak more correct English, yet lapsed strongly into the vernacular when excited. "She has been a-wheeling and a-coaxing o' me, and got words out of me which I had sooner have had my tongue cut out

of me than have uttered, if I had only known what a sly vixen she was."

"I can this matter not comprehend—make it more clear."

"Well, that there French Madame as was here, she has been a-rattling at Mr. Durant, telling him as he and Lady Fleming was too thick, and wants to drag me into it, just to separate me from my best friends—she has got no other mortal end. Oh, she is a bad 'un, she is."

"*Ach*, this is an imbroglio in which you should not mixed be. Neither I nor you understand these people's affairs. How comes to you this knowledge?"

"Well, she told it out clear and straight this morning her own blessed self. 'Deb,' says she, 'you're a bad girl—you fetches and carries messages for Mr. Durant, and I'll tell the Meister;' and it ain't true, sir, not a word of it. I never fetched nor carried no message for Mr. Durant but once, and that was ever so long ago, to a hideous old woman who lives down a back street, and I up at once and told her so. 'And who was the woman? Tell me who the woman was,' right off she says, 'or I'll make the whole quarter too hot for you.' Well, I told her she was nobody like worth having—only a Miss Wilson, an old nurse or summat. 'Where does she live?' she asks sharp. 'Oh, in Clare Street. There, don't go for making mischief 'twixt me and my friends.' 'Just what I wants to know—it's the precioussest bit of information I have had this many a day,' says she. 'Didn't I come to London to look for her? And to find her that promiscuous like is luck, sure enough.' And now whatever I am to do I don't know."

"I see not, child—I see not such great complication."

"Didn't he tell me to say nothing, and haven't I gone just contrary to his orders? And won't more mischief than one can count come of it? And that I hadn't left my broom at all, but just stuck to the sweepin', I wish with all my heart."

"Does this Madame know this Miss Wilson?"

"Drat her, she knows a vast deal more than she has a right to know. I wish she had stayed in France before she came a-meddling with me."

"She has from here gone—you will see her again no more. Gretchen has received money for her stay, and an hour since she departed with her box."

"Oh, I know—I saw her off—but she is a-going to see Miss Wilson; and if there ain't a row! Dear heart, whatever shall I do?" And Deb began to howl in a manner which both perplexed and terrified the old German.

"*Kind, Kind*, this is not to be tolerated. Let us make melody and forget the small miseries of life."

"Bah!" cried Deb, looking up fiercely. "I have no patience for music now. I am that vexed I could kill myself. Whatever to do I don't know. I'll go straight off round to Mr. Durant's rooms and tell him the whole story. That is the only way as I see clear."

"Round to the gentleman's rooms! But, *Kind*, this is not seeming in a modest maiden."

"Lor' bless ye, Meister, I am only a gutter-child. Nobody ever meddles with me. And the month is up long ago since I promised not to wander. I couldn't settle down nohow if I hadn't made a clean breast of the whole matter."

"Where is my Gretchen?" asked the German, who was thoroughly perplexed by the nomadic, restless spirit of the girl.

"Oh, she is out—so now is my time; for if she once hears of the matter she'll be sure to have some sensible saw that will only irritate me. Let me go, Meister—let me go; and I'll promise if I only get this business off my hands to settle in quite comfortable like, and never want to tramp any more."

"*Ach*, well, you shall follow your mind; only promise to be good for ever hereafter."

"With all my heart," she cried, kissing the old man, as was her wont when he did anything to please her; and in another three minutes she had tied on her bonnet and left him to smoke the calumet of peace while he pondered over the impracticability of seeking to manage and guide a woman.

"Mr. Durant had left for Swinton Hall only two hours ago." This was the information which awaited Deb when she reached his lodgings. Language more characteristic than refined fell from her pretty lips as the grumpy old landlady vouchsafed the intelligence. She turned sharply to go away, when she nearly fell into the arms of Algy Duncombe, who, like herself, had come to inquire for Harry Durant. On more than one occasion she had seen him at Lady Fleming's; and while Algy had been amused by the girl's quaintness, she on her part had been attracted by his chaffy, off-hand manner.

"Hullo," he said, "Miss Deb! Durant is in luck when he receives visits from you!"

"He is out, away from town; and that isn't luck when I want to speak to him," she answered, shortly.

"What is to command? Can I be of any service to you?" he asked, laughing.

"You!" And there was a sort of sneer in her tone. She changed it, however, and said, musingly, "I am in a terrible bother. I wonder if you could help me?"

"I thought you were in comfortable quarters at the German's Art School. You surely have not left there?"

"Oh, no; it is nothing of that sort—something about Mr. Durant and Lady Fleming. I wonder if you are to be trusted?"

"With anything concerning them, certainly. He is one of my greatest friends; she and I are like brother and sister."

"Hurrah! Then you are just the man. Shouldn't wonder if you knew the French party as was lodging at

our school—leastwise I don't believe she is French, only she calls herself Madame Alan."

Algy Duncombe gave a long whistle.

"Shouldn't wonder if I did," he said, laughing. "Go on; tell me all about it. What mischief has she been hatching?"

"Well, she's going to tell Mr. Durant as I said they was lovers, they two; and wants to make out as I have been a fetchin' and carryin' for them; and it ain't a bit true, is it, sir?"

"Not a word of truth in it, I should say, decidedly. If she is the individual I imagine her to be she is capable of inventing any lie to serve her own ends."

"And you'll tell Mr. Durant that I ain't to blame—that I haven't done no harm?"

"Why, he will only laugh at the whole story. It is too absurd. But look here, Miss Deb: you must not go about repeating it, or people will fancy it is true."

"To think as I should demean myself by doing such a thing except to a friend of the family like yourself! But you will explain it, sir, won't you?"

"Yes, certainly, when I fully understand it myself. This French Madame is at your house, you say?"

"Not now. She went some weeks ago to nurse a sick friend. All on a sudden like, to-day, she came for her things and is off altogether."

As he remembered his walk with the Grey Widow, Algy went into fits of laughter, which irritated Deb, inclined as she was to regard the whole affair most seriously.

"Well, I can't waste time talking," she said, "'specially as I don't see that it's a subject for grinning."

"Forgive me, Miss Deb, I beg of you. If you knew as many of the ins and outs as I do you would not be able to resist a smile. Where has this charming lady gone? She always wore grey, I think?"

"Grey or black," answered Deb; "she had grey on to-day, and looked that trim and neat, if I hadn't been rare and cross I should have admired her."

"It was to-day, then, that you and she had this conversation?"

Deb nodded her head.

"But you have not heard the worst," she went on; "there's more behind, only I am afraid of telling you."

"Half-confidences invariably lead to mischief, Miss Deb. If you want me to do any good, you must tell me the whole."

"Well, I suppose it is the only thing as can be done," she murmured, musingly; and then she gave him all the information she possessed about Miss Wilson.

Algy Duncombe was rather perplexed how to act. He did not wish to appear as though he were prying into his friend Durant's affairs, but at the same time he felt that some immediate steps should be taken to ascertain what use Mrs. Fitzalan was going to make of the information Deb had so unguardedly given her.

"Come with me; we will go to Clare Street at once," he said, after a few seconds of deliberation.

"Oh, I never can face that surly old party again," she exclaimed.

"At all events, we can go into the street. It may not be necessary to go into the house."

"Well, come on; though I can't see as we shall do anything except make matters worse by interfering."

So they started together; and a singularly assorted pair they were. Algy was got up in Poole's last fashion, though London was at its flattest, and he would not have been in town save for sundry disappointments, which had caused his country visits not to fit; while Deb, in her quaintly-cut garments, which bore such unmistakable trace of Gretchen's scissors, looked rather like the show-girl from a country village, dressed by the charity of the

Lady Bountiful. But they talked volubly and intimately notwithstanding their disparity of appearance. Algy's frank open-heartedness put Deb entirely at her ease, and from her remarks he gathered that there was, perhaps, more reason for Mrs. Fitzalan's insinuations than he had at first suspected."

"Beast!" he muttered to himself, "if she knew the girl cared for Durant why did she let her marry Fleming?"

"That is the house; but I ain't a-going in; so what you brought me here for I can't say," remarked Deb, coming to a dead stop at the corner of Clare Street.

"Oh, indeed!" he answered. "Well, do you know, I, on the contrary, have rather a fancy to make the acquaintance of this Miss Wilson. But I would not take you in on any account. Pray don't be alarmed. You can be useful though, if you don't mind. Just keep watch, and if the Grey Widow should appear, don't let her surprise me; try and keep her in check until I have finished my visit. I'll look out of the window occasionally, to see if the coast is clear. It is a front room, is it not?"

"Yes, that one up there. Gracious! what a spree! Whatever are you going to say?"

"Never mind; you play your part, I'll play mine. I love an adventure above everything in life."

He rang the bell as he spoke, and the same slatternly girl with whom Deb had made acquaintance in times past opened the door.

"I think you have a lodger of the name of Wilson; will you kindly tell her I wish to speak to her on business?"

The girl let him into the dark passage and went up with the message, treating him much more politely than she had done Deb when she had gone there at Mr. Durant's bidding.

"Miss says if you beant one of the Swell Mob you may

come up," was the answer, given with a grin, which made some very white teeth conspicuous in contrast to a black-leaded face.

"Not having the slightest connection with the firm, I will come up with pleasure," said Algy, laughing; and in another minute he found himself face to face with the grim old lady who had so frightened Deb. She attempted to rise as he entered.

"Pray, madam, I entreat you, do not move. Allow me to place myself a chair close to you, as I fancy a few minutes' conversation may be interesting to both of us."

"Really, sir, I have not the honour of your acquaintance."

"Just so, my dear lady; but I trust you are about to make it, since your visiting list embraces the names of one or two of my intimate friends."

"My visiting list! Bless the man, why, I never get off this sofa!"

"So I regret to learn; yet people visit you, as I am doing to-day—Durant, for instance, both came and sent to you not many months ago."

"It is little enough as I have seen of Mr. Durant—would have been better, perhaps, for some folks if I had seen more. He did come to me; but I have had no tidings of him since, which is queer, considering. Did he send you here, sir?"

"To tell the truth honestly, he did not. He is not in London, but circumstances have come to my knowledge which made me think a talk with you might not be altogether disadvantageous. You are acquainted with the name of Fitzalan?"

She looked at him keenly for a second; then she said, with a little gasp—

"You ain't the child, are you?"

Algy Duncombe smiled. What child she meant he

could not in the least imagine; but that he was not that child he felt very sure; so he shook his head.

"Ah, no, of course not; it was a girl, and you are too old. I don't know what I am saying." And she passed her hand across her brow, as though to help her memory. "I wish I had never known anything about it—it is so worritin' Better to be a pauper than to lead an easy life with other folks' secrets always dangling at your heels."

"Now for a bold plunge," thought Algy. "If I don't take a header into the mystery I shall never make anything of this woman." Then, aloud, "Are you aware that Mrs. Fitzalan is in London?"

"Her that is dead and gone—or her that is alive and well?" she asked, wildly.

"Well, not having had any communication with spirits myself, I should imagine it is the latter." And Algy smiled. "She has been seeking for your address, and has only discovered it to-day."

"She'd put some poison in that there tea-pot and send me into the next world as soon as look at me," said the old woman, pointing to a brown hardware teapot which stood on the hob.

"Should not be surprised in the least," was her companion's reassuring reply. "But forewarned is forearmed, they say—don't let her find you."

"Lor' bless ye, Mr. What-ever-is-your-name, I can't go worritin' out of here—they must just do their worst among them—but whatever I was made a victim for I can't think."

"It is mighty unpleasant for you; but what shall we do?" said Algy, getting up and taking a turn to the window, to have a look at Deb.

"I am afeard of that woman, I am. She Mrs. Fitzalan, indeed! Why, she can't hold a candle to her as is gone. Still I am afeard of her, and I am getting old and helpless. Mr. Durant says I have acted a base, unprincipled part, he

calls it. Perhaps I have; but what was I to do? No one was there to guide me, so I just did what she and the Frenchman told me."

"And now?" asked Algy, still looking out of the window, and not being altogether able to arrive at what it all meant.

"Well, I put the whole thing in Mr. Durant's hands a few months back, and not another word have I heard since."

"And suppose you have a visit from Mrs. Fitzalan?"

"I don't much think as she'll come here—she ain't fond of looking at me—I know too much. If she do she'll offer me money to hold my tongue, and I shall tell her that Mr. Durant has promised to double her offers if I speak up honestly when the time comes; and as for the proofs, he has got them long ago. But, Lord, sir, it is that bamboozling I wish I was out of it."

"Stick to Durant, my good Miss Wilson—he is as true as steel. So you think this Mrs. Fitz—I forget her real name—will not pay you a visit?"

"Margaret Denham, sir, that is her name. Her father was lodge-keeper at Swinton Park, Bertrands' place, for ever so many years. She was always intriguing and ambitious from the very first, when she went to be governess to the vicar's children—them as is all lying in the graveyard now. She was turned away from there for her flaunty ways. People do say that in those days she set her cap at Mr. Durant himself, and——"

"Stop, Miss Wilson; I have already told you that Mr. Durant is an intimate friend of mine. I do not wish to pry into the details of his past life; I merely came to warn you that you might expect ere long a communication from this woman, and to put you on your guard. Having accomplished this part of my mission, I will write to Durant and let him decide on what is next to be done."

Easy-going and fond of frolic though he was, con-

scientious scruples had assailed Algy when he found that, partly out of fun, he had thrust himself into the midst of a mystery which probably Durant would not care for him to unravel; and though burning with curiosity to discover by what means the Grey Widow had assumed the right of taking the name of Fitzalan, he resolved to beat a graceful and honourable retreat; so he won the old lady's heart by his pretty speeches, promised to come and see her again when he had heard from his friend, and joined Deb at the corner of the street, without trusting himself to ask any farther questions, muttering, however, as he walked along—

“Lodge-keeper to the Bertrands! How comes it Mrs. B. did not recognize her? So, so—is sweet Cis her daughter, after all? Never—that is quite impossible. By Jove, it is a terrible hash—I wonder how it will all end?”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AT BREAK OF DAY.

“Do not leave me, Durant. To you alone I can speak unreservedly of my affairs. You will take care of Cicely if I die—promise me.”

“Aye, aye, man—it is all right. Don't worry about affairs; they will come square; only make haste and get well.”

Then there was a silence, and the grey morning began to dawn into the room where the sick man lay, nursed so carefully by him who had appointed himself as watcher during the long hours of the night. Several days had passed since Sir Hubert had been taken ill, and the doctors had declared the case to be not hopeless, though they had

enjoined perfect quiet. All the household save Durant had gone to bed—even Cicely. She had begged very hard to be allowed to remain with Sir Hubert, but Durant had looked at her pale, almost haggard, face—for mental excitement was already setting its stamp even on that young brow—and had insisted that she should take at least an hour or two of repose, especially as for the last two nights while her husband had been ill, she had resolutely refused to leave him.

“Don’t go away, Durant—stay with me—are you still there?” Sir Hubert had again muttered brokenly after a long pause.

He did not ask for Cicely, but for Durant. It was clear that the lawsuit and money difficulties weighed heavily on his mind as he lay there; and he leant on the strong man’s succour to help him and to shield his young wife from embarrassment if the worst should befall. A trying position for Durant, but one nevertheless that he resolved to face unflinchingly and sustain with honour. As he sat there alone during the watches of the still night, thoughts crowded on him apace, and good and evil angels seemed battling as it were for empire. The stumbling-blocks in honour’s path were multitudinous, the complications which surrounded him varied and incessant, each one seeming to drag him into a dangerous bye-way with a force more resistless than its predecessor. Yet for all that Harry Durant’s good angels did not desert him. For Cicely’s sake he must fight and conquer as a brave man should. That he is heavily weighted there is little doubt, especially as at this moment he sees her sweet face with its lustrous eyes peeping in at the half-open door, asking him, with an inquiring glance, if all goes well in the darkened chamber. He rises and goes forward to speak to her, imagining Sir Hubert to be asleep.

“Not going, Durant?—don’t go,” once more pleaded the voice from the bed.

"Only for a second, to speak to Cicely."

"Ah, poor Cis! Yes, comfort poor Cis."

Mr. Durant went out into the gallery on which the room opened. She was standing there wrapped in her quilted silken dressing-gown, the pale morning breaking in at the window over her head.

"Is Sir Hubert going to die? Oh, tell me, please, Mr. Durant."

"I hope not. But should you be so very sorry, Cis?"

"I should never forgive myself," she answered. "I have not been half good and kind enough to him. Oh, pray that he may live, Mr. Durant, and that I may, if possible, retrieve the past."

"You are tired and feverish, my poor child, and magnify your very venial sins far beyond their actual demerits."

"Oh, don't talk to me like that; you don't know how wicked my thoughts have been sometimes—God grant you never may. If Sir Hubert dies I will go right away into some distant land, and no one shall ever hear of me again."

"My dear Cis, if you excite yourself like this I shall have to send you right away. Fleming is progressing favourably towards recovery. It will only retard its progress if he sees you thus."

"But he is not here; he cannot hear what we are saying, and I am so very miserable I don't know what to do."

"Go back to bed and get a few hours' sleep. Now, if ever, a dose of chloral would be permissible."

"I have taken it till it has no more effect than water," she answered while the wild look in her eyes quite startled him. "If Sir Hubert dies I should like to die too."

"Poor child, do you care for him so very dearly?"

Was the tone one of regret or of pity which rang in Mr. Durant's voice? She turned away as she answered it.

"He cared for me, and when he has gone there will be no one on the earth who loves me."

"Cicely! how dare you utter such words, when you know I have loved you as no man ever loved woman before?"

She hid her face and sobbed.

"Not now—don't tell me that now. The past can never come back—you once said so yourself."

"The past! Our lives are not past—our love is not past. What do you mean?"

"That your words are madness, Mr. Durant, and that my sin becomes tenfold every instant that I stand here and listen to them."

She raised her head and looked at him clear and full with her bright eyes. He turned abashed from their gaze.

"Forgive me," he said, meekly. "Your trouble, your forlorn state, made me forget myself. Heaven knows I, too, have striven to be true and honest."

"We will help each other, as good friends should," she said, holding out her hand to him. "I dare not blame you for a sin which lies so heavily on my own heart."

He kissed the cold hand reverently and held it for some moments in his own.

"Durant, are you there? Why do you stay away so long?" It was the sick man's voice that startled him.

"Go back to bed, my child, and trust to me to do the best for Fleming. You will trust me, will you not?"

"With everything I possess—even that which is dearest to me on earth—my fair name," she replied, unhesitatingly.

He only pressed her hand for answer as he repassed into Sir Hubert's room; but he registered a vow that more than ever he would keep guard over his looks and words, lest sign or breath from him should injure the untarnished reputation she had committed to his keeping.

"What were you and Cis talking about? Why does

she not come here?" were the querulous questions with which he was received.

"I have sent Lady Fleming to bed—her nerves are quite unstrung by sitting up so much. I will stay with you till she has had a rest."

"But then you will not go away altogether?"

"No, not altogether—not if you want me, that is to say."

"Of course I want you. Who is to arrange all that miserable business but you? I believe you talk of going away on purpose to thwart me."

"My dear fellow, do keep your mind at rest. I will do all that is necessary; but the courts do not open till November. You will be in your old form long before then."

"Never, Durant, never—you will have to look after my poor little Cis before you expect. I wonder if she would miss me much? I have often thought I was too old for her; yet I have tried to be good to her and considerate of her youth."

Frenzied almost to madness, Durant answered perhaps more sharply than exactly befitted the circumstances.

"My dear man, this is too maudlin. For goodness' sake drop sentiment. Get well as fast as you can, and leave the rest to luck. Lady Fleming has no fancy for widowhood yet awhile—she told me so just now."

"Then she would be sorry if I died? Poor Cis!"

"Look here, Fleming: if you are going on talking, instead of trying to compose yourself, I shall leave the room. A man who gives himself no chance of getting better is committing an act of moral suicide. I will do the best I can for you and your affairs; only for gracious sake be quiet."

Thus adjured, Sir Hubert was forced to lapse into silence and leave the subject which was driving Harry Durant to the last extremity of bewilderment.

Once more quietude reigned in the sick room, and Durant's thoughts "ran on at will," wandering among such endless labyrinths of dark fancies and perplexing torments that it seemed as though they never could emerge into the bright sunshine of the clear sky.

Life again became instinct in the hushed house, yet no farther words had the two men spoken. Sir Hubert had sunk into an uneasy slumber, while the other with wide open eyes sat and glared at the familiar objects round, as though quite lost to all cognizance of mere actual and material form and presence; and when Sir Hubert's servant came at last with some tea for his master, it was with a painful and almost impossible effort that Durant shook off his waking nightmare and sought to grasp the meaning of commonplace sentences and expressions. A cold bath and a hasty rush out into the fresh air must serve him instead of sleep, for to coax a visit from the poppy-crowned god would, he well knew, prove utterly abortive. It was by no means the first time in his life that for various causes he had passed a night without going to bed, yet never before had it told so heavily upon him. He heard the breakfast-bell ring as he was wandering in the grounds, and joined the assembled guests before they were seated at the table. Numerous were the inquiries after Sir Hubert, whose sudden illness had cast such a gloom over a cheery party.

"Oh, he is better—is not going to make a die of it this time, so no one need be inconvenienced. The usual amusements may go on."

This was hopeful intelligence, especially to Mrs. Bertrand, who was singularly unsympathizing in illness and trouble, and had almost made up her mind to go off bag and baggage and leave the Flemings undisputed sway in the establishment.

"Well, that is good hearing, particularly for you, Harry, for I never saw any one look so ill in my life—we shall have you on our hands next."

"Oh, I shall get some sleep to-night. If Fleming continues better Burke has offered to sit up with him."

"And her ladyship—what is her ladyship about? Why does she not sit up herself? A young girl like that sleeping in her bed when other people are making themselves quite ill! I have no patience with such women."

The hot colour spread itself over Durant's brow, as he longed to defend Cicely from this unjust attack; but he dared not, and at this moment the door opened and she herself came into the room. If an ashen pallor and large black circles round her eyes betokened what is called a "good night's rest," Cicely showed the signs palpably. As it was she was received with a little cry, for no one there failed to note the change that had come over her since they had seen her only yesterday, and the heart of the strong man quailed as Durant looked at her. While the others were profuse in their regrets that she should have thought it necessary to come down, and offers of a comfortable chair, breakfast, etc., were going on all round, he neither spoke nor stirred, but only looked at Cicely, and bit his moustache nervously. She was very calm and composed, and grateful for every one's kindness; hoped Sir Hubert was really a very little better, sipped her coffee, played with her toast without eating it, and was as totally unlike the dashing Cicely of the last few weeks as though she had exchanged idiosyncrasies with some of her companions. Mrs. Bertrand was amazed. She had never given her credit for liking aught in connection with Sir Hubert save his position, and this sort of tacit declaration of her love for him was now more than she could comprehend. No one, luckily, read between the lines save Harry Durant himself. As he thought of their meeting in the grey morning, and remembered how he had passed through a lifetime since that hour, he was fully capable of guessing the whole truth when he gazed on Cicely's suffering face.

"I must go back to Sir Hubert," she said at last.

"And he bade me ask you to come presently, Mr. Durant. He has some letters he wants you to write for him."

They were the first words she had addressed to Durant. He only bowed his head in answer, and she was gone, leaving the assembled society, after the fashion of gossiping coteries, to discuss her appearance and her feelings from each individual's own particular view of the subject. Harry Durant endured the painful ordeal of listening to these haphazard remarks, this flippant conversation, patiently, and after a while rose, with a little sigh as of relief. He had accomplished his object and ascertained that no one there suspected the real state of affairs, nor had any idea of linking his name with that of the young wife who had just gone upstairs to sit by her husband's bed of pain.

All the men were going to shoot except Mr. Seton, who was playing the devoted to Rose—or her money-bags—and had offered to drive the young ladies to an old castle about five miles off, where they would carry luncheon for the "shooters."

"Would cousin Harry come?"

"No, that was quite out of the question. He had letters to write for Fleming, and after that should try and get a sleep. What was his aunt going to do?"

Mrs. Bertrand was going out, of course. When was she ever known to let the doves out of her sight?"

"Then there would be nothing to disturb his slumbers—not even a laugh or a sneeze—quite a quiet house. The smoking-room sofa, with a pipe—that would be about the correct thing," he imagined.

"Nasty, horrid, dirty habit!" remarked his aunt's incisive voice. "When was he going to give it up?"

"Give up tobacco! '*Dieu nous a donné le tabac pour endormir nos douleurs et nos passions*'—at least so Balzac says. At all events, tobacco is to men what nagging is to women: when they give up the one I'll think about giving up the other."

With all his troubles Harry Durant had not become so thoroughly pulseless and inert that he had not sufficient strength left to fire a shot at his dear aunt.

"Really, Harry, I wish you would be more careful; your conversation is not fit for the girls," she retorted, frowning at the doves for laughing at cousin Harry's little joke. "Go and see that the luncheon-basket is properly packed, Rose; you have dawdled over your breakfast quite long enough."

"Thus, as is of familiar every-day occurrence, the platitudes of life mix themselves up inextricably with the graver and more important stakes which lie hidden among the rubbish that envelopes them." So Harry Durant thought as he strode across the hall away upstairs once more into that darkened room where Cicely sat in shadow watching, her husband's hand lying peacefully in hers.

"Well, old fellow, you are ever so much better; we shall have you on your legs again in a day or two," were the cheery words with which Durant greeted his friend. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Write and ask Hawkstone to come down. I should like to make my will."

"Pooh, nonsense; wait till you can go to him. It is absurd perplexing your head with all this business."

"Nay, don't thwart me, Durant. I shall be easier if I have my way."

"All right, then, you shall not be contradicted for the world. What next?"

"After you have written that and another letter or two, of which I will give you the particulars presently, I want you to take this little woman for a walk. Even in this faint light I can see she looks quite ill from being shut up in this close room."

Cicely gave a little gasp.

"Oh, Sir Hubert, who will look after you if I go out?"

"I shall sleep a little presently, I make no doubt; and Louis is very attentive."

"Perhaps Lady Fleming would enjoy her walk more if I remained with you—she would not be so anxious," suggested Durant.

"No, no, no; a cheery companion will do her as much good as the fresh air. How perverse you both are this morning! you contradict me in everything."

They looked at each other, these two, and Cicely said, softly—

"We will go, dear Sir Hubert, if you wish it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MILL-DAM.

HARRY DURANT exchanged his pipe and his nap for a walk with Cicely in the bright autumn sunshine. They wandered along listlessly without speaking; both were wearied and exhausted from the mental and physical strain which had been put on them of late. Old haunts too had their influence, for there was not one of nature's pictures, not a tree, not a square inch of ground, which was not thoroughly engraved on each mind. Neither asked the other where they should go, but to the old mill did intuition seem to lead them. For Cicely it had fewer memories than for Durant, yet they had strolled there together before, and it had been Old Peter's favourite walk. Across the running water, about five hundred yards from the mill, there was a rustic bridge, athwart which a weeping willow cast its friendly shade. There they lingered for a while, listening to the sounding stream, watching the sunshine on the ripples. No more dangerous talk had been indulged in; what little they had said, had been about the still life which was around them, rather than of their own shares in the busier

life of action which lay beyond. For some moments they stood on the little bridge, while naught broke the silence save the babbling river and the wood-pigeon in the adjoining wood cooing to its mate. Neither dared give utterance to inward thought, yet the sympathy which reigned in that unbroken silence was as perfect as the harmony which dwelt in the scene on which they gazed. Could world-warfare, passions, jealousies, taint so heaven-breathing an atmosphere, so calm and beautiful a repose? Truly they did not exist in those hearts, which only longed for peace, and that strength might be given them out of the mystic life to withstand the temptations by which they were so sorely assailed. Yet the wild beasts seeking whom they may devour were prowling even in that fair Eden-land, and they were no harmonious accents in which Mr. Durant ejaculated on a sudden—

“By Heaven, here! Fate is too remorseless.”

Cicely looked up at him in astonishment, then turned her eyes where his were angrily directed.

“Mrs. Fitzalan!” she cried, half-glad to see her friend again—half-sorry that any one from the world should have come to dispel the dream in which she had been dwelling for the last half-hour.

“Ah, you did not expect me here; and, truth to say, I was as little prepared to meet you—together, too.” And she laughed gaily.

“Sir Hubert has been very ill—perhaps you have heard—and as we are both tired out with nursing he asked Mr. Durant to bring me for a little walk.”

“*Qui s’excuse, s’accuse*,” said Mrs. Fitzalan, still laughing. “So you have been sharing the task of nursing the husband—very pretty occupation, upon my word, and one in which I doubt not you are both adepts.”

The scarlet colour mantled Cicely’s pale face, but she only said, quietly—

“Please don’t be unkind and cross to me. I have often

wished for you and asked for you. Are you not glad to see me again? Why did you come here without——”

But, at a fierce, imperative interruption from Harry Durant, the sentence remained unfinished.

“Is this meeting premeditated or accidental?” he asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

“What a stupid question!” she answered. “How could I possibly know that chance would lead your footsteps to the mill-dam?”

“The devil seems to assist you to track my steps in a way you could never do unless you were his ally. Woman, I tell you I will have no more of it. Leave me a free agent to manage my affairs as I will, or take the consequences of your interference.”

“Brave man though you may be, your words are bigger than your actions,” she replied, with a sneer.

Harry Durant’s self-control was very nearly exhausted—if she had only been a man, that he might have struck her! As it was he was powerless, and as he looked at her his eyes gleamed with fury, and the veins swelled about his temples till they stood out in large knots.

Cicely, terror-stricken, laid her hand pleadingly on his arm. “Oh, don’t, please don’t say or do anything dreadful. Let us go away—Sir Hubert will be already wondering where we are all this long time.”

“There is a dear little wheedling darling, coax him into pretty behaviour, and remind him that the husband must be kept in good humour.”

There was no occasion for Mr. Durant’s resentment; all the latent fire which exists in every woman’s nature, ready to burn fiercely when her self-respect is wounded, was aglow in an instant as Cicely turned on Mrs. Fitzalan at this speech.

“How dare you speak to me in that tone? By what right am I to be insulted by you? I have to thank you for charity in past days, and God knows I would not be

ungrateful or forget your kindness ; but I demand to be told at once what I have done to merit this injurious language ? ”

“ So, so, my Lady Fleming, you are on the high ropes are you ? With all your fine words you *do* seem to forget though that I lent you the hand which mounted you.”

“ It is false ! ” struck in Durant, fiercely. “ Cicely is indebted to you for nothing—all you have in the world of rights belongs to—— ”

“ Stop ! ” she cried, interrupting him. “ Has the final step been taken between you two ; does the world know of your *liaison*, that you are so ready with these rash assertions ? ”

Would he not have felled her with a blow, and seen her body float down the tranquil stream, had he dared ? Ah, Mrs. Fitzalan was reaping her full quota of revenge now, with that aggravating woman’s tongue of hers doing deadlier mischief than even weapons of warfare could have effected. What could he say, what do ? He turned and gazed on Cicely’s scared white face with a look of pitying anguish.

“ Take me back to my husband, Mr. Durant,” she had said, in that dead-calm tone which was like some one speaking in a dream. The full force of Mrs. Fitzalan’s last words had scarcely reached her yet—only stunned her by their coarse virulence.

“ Back to your husband, poor fool ! If he had known how to keep his own I should scarcely have selected him for your mate. And he thinks himself secure in your love and Harry Durant’s friendship. I am sorry for him, for I have no grudge against him ; but sooner or later he must know the truth.”

“ Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how can you talk thus ? I have tried to be true and faithful to him, God is my judge.”

“ Lady Fleming, for mercy’s sake do not attempt to vindicate yourself against accusations which are utterly

baseless. Mrs. Fitzalan and I must settle this matter later. Let me escort you back to the house."

"Perhaps I had better return alone," was Cicely's low answer; "only I am afraid of what may happen here."

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed.

"Don't be afraid, dear; I will not harm him. He knows the deep regard in which I have always held him."

"Come, Lady Fleming, this interview must cease." And he took her tenderly by the hand and led her a few paces off. "As for you, Margaret, we shall meet again."

"No," she said, "we have no farther scores to settle. I have given the Roland for your Oliver, and shall be in London before the afternoon is out."

Mr. Durant did not answer her, but walked on with Cicely, whose excited state filled him with trouble and anxiety. She was sobbing convulsively as she clung to his arm; and what could he say to comfort her—poor stricken child? Ah, how deep-rooted and remorseless had been Mrs. Fitzalan's vengeance when she struck him through her!

"Let me go away—let me go away for ever. I shall never bear to look any one in the face again after this, Sir Hubert least of all. Oh! I can never see him."

"My dearest Cicely, you have done no harm. You must not heed that vile woman's mad words."

"No harm!" she echoed drearily. "How can you say there is no harm? Have I not sworn to love one man while my heart was filled with love for another? It is useless playing with the subject; do we not both know it—too well—too well!"

Harry Durant's brow was crimson. He was an honest and an honourable man; but who can always and altogether withstand the promptings of the flesh? He bent his head and kissed the tear-stained face. She did not resist him—did not turn from him angrily—only said, in low accents, "I am Sir Hubert Fleming's wife, and you have

promised to guard my honour and help me to be true to him."

Her words, appealing as they did to his higher nature, had a surer effect than wrath would have commanded.

"My child, what can I do?" he asked.

"Leave me for ever," was the prompt reply; "or rather stay here and nurse Sir Hubert, while I go back to town."

"Cicely, such a scheme would be madness. The whole house would echo with talk about it."

"I care not. I must go. I could not look Sir Hubert in the face with that woman's words ringing in my ears. I must go away somewhere—I care not whither. Oh, let me go, Mr. Durant—let me go. Lady Susan will take care of me."

"Ah!" he said, in a tone of relief. "She is a loyal friend. But, Cicely, what will Fleming say? What will the Bertrands think?"

"I care not; only let me go. It will be worse to stay here, for I feel I shall betray myself."

"My poor, poor child! and to think that I am powerless to help you; I who love you better than my life! Curse that woman and her wiles; they have brought misery and destruction to us both. By Heaven, if——"

"Hush, hush; please do not talk wildly, dear. Only let me go away somewhere to die in peace."

"You to die, my darling Cicely; and I, who had hoped to make your life one long, bright dream!"

"Brightness and dreams have faded away for ever," she said, shivering. "And, oh! I am so dreadfully afraid of the reality I have to face—all alone, too."

"Cicely, do you want to drive me quite mad?"

"No, dear; only to remind you of what *must* be, for I do not think you either see or understand it quite. Let me go right away, please. I shall be better when I have got away from the place where I have heard those dreadful

words. Oh, can I ever forget them!" And once again her frame shook with that hysterical weeping, every sob of which was a dagger plunged in Durant's heart.

"I have done no very grievous sin; why should I be made to suffer thus?" she wailed. "She persuaded me to marry Sir Hubert, and I thought I should have liked him; and so I should if——"

"If I had not crossed your path again," he said, bitterly. "Ah, Cicely, would I had died before I had brought misery to you."

"Poor dear—poor dear—you could not help it. We were both powerless; only, at whatever cost, we must part now. You will arrange it for me, will you not?"

"My child, I will do everything that man can do to shield and save you."

"And I will trust you to the end."

Then for many minutes they walked on without speaking, she still leaning on the strong arm without which her feeble steps would have tottered, her strength probably have altogether failed. Arrived at the little wood, they paused a while. She could go no farther without rest, so she sat on a falling tree, looking more as if she were the spirit of the place than human flesh and blood; he stood at a short distance and watched her. He was racking his brain to devise some plan to help, but each one as it presented itself proved futile. He felt utterly miserable, but he dared not speak his thoughts, for his words would only breathe of a mad passion, and would shock and wound her.

A sound as of some one among the underwood made Cicely, whose nerves were wildly uncontrollable, start to her feet.

"Is *she* coming again? Oh, let us go quickly!"

The form that emerged from among the trees was, however, that of a man.

"Burke!" cried Mr. Durant, feeling that perhaps some

help might be obtained from the friendly vicar, though his impulse was by no means to confide to him or any one the real state of the case.

"I am glad I have found you," said the worthy pastor. "I have been up to the house to see Sir Hubert, and on my way back I met Margaret—the so-called Mrs. Fitzalan. She told me my presence was needed here."

Durant's brow lowered.

"For what purpose?" he asked, haughtily.

"That she did not say; but I imagined Cicely was not well."

"Nor is she," answered Durant, relieved by his reply. "All this nursing has been too much for her; she is quite knocked up. She ought to have gone to bed instead of coming out walking; only Fleming insisted, and like a fool I have brought her too far."

"She had better come to the vicarage; it is much nearer than the house. She can have her old room to rest in till a carriage is sent for her."

"Yes, take me to the vicarage—let me go there altogether—back to peace and happiness!"

"She is so hysterical and excited I am afraid of a nervous fever," said Durant. "Yes, let us take her to the vicarage. Anything is better than my aunt's inquisitive questioning."

The vicar looked from the one to the other shrewdly. That something important had occurred he fully suspected; mere fatigue would scarcely be a sufficient cause thus thoroughly to overbalance the equilibrium of both. The real truth did not dawn on him; he rather ascribed the present position of affairs to a painful interview with Mrs. Fitzalan, for he knew enough of each individual history to be aware that there were many dangerous rocks against which these three might dash if they attempted to sail together, and he fancied Cicely had discovered their existence for the first time. To come to the rescue, what-

ever had happened, was the vicar's sincere desire; so he asked no questions—only repeated his invitation to the vicarage, and gave his arm to Cicely to lead her through the wood; while Durant, with a very downcast pained look on his usually cheery face, followed at a little distance.

"The doctor came in while I was at the house," remarked the vicar after a while; "he gave it as his opinion that in a few days Sir Hubert may be removed to his own house."

Strange, he thought, that this intelligence called forth no immediate answer. Cicely could not express joy—the going home could afford no happiness to her—nothing, in her then mood, she imagined, would ever awaken her interest again.

At the door of the vicarage Cicely dropped the vicar's arm and went up to Durant, while the vicar passed on in search of nurse Frizby, who he felt sure would surround Lady Fleming with comforts she had judged far too luxurious for Cicely the village-girl.

"Be kind to Sir Hubert and tell him gently," she said.

"Tell him what? My child, are you mad? There is nothing to tell."

"Yes, tell him I have gone away, and would rather live alone in the future."

"My God! this cannot be—for mercy's sake listen to reason!"

She shook her head.

"I cannot go on acting a lie," she said, in a low tone.

"You *must* be careful. Think what the consequences will be to us both, what dire evil you are doing Fleming in his present suffering state."

"It can hurt nobody but me," she answered.

"Do his happiness and mine, then, count for nothing in the scale?" he asks, driven almost to his wits' end to find an argument by which Cicely may be induced to let events take their course, and not make a victim of herself by

what he in his mannishness considers to be morbidly nursing a sense of guilt which has no reality.

"Should you be happier if I stayed with Sir Hubert?"

"How can you ask the question? How could I be happy if I knew you were living miserably by yourself, expiating in a sort of penitential life the existence of a mere sentiment?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a twinge as of pain. Was her life-sorrow a matter of mere sentiment to him? Durant saw the effect his words had had, but he did not attempt to withdraw them—he would have said anything, however hard and cruel, if by so doing he could save her from herself. "Arrange it as you will," she said, after a pause. "My good name will, I see, be safe in your hands; only I cannot bear quite to say good-bye now. We shall meet again, shall we not?"

"Lives cast together as ours have been by fate are not sundered easily," he replied, in a solemn tone. "But we must be brave and exercise our free will. See, here come the vicar and nurse Frizby. This little lady has come back to your care, you see, Frizby. Take her in to rest a while. Her husband's illness has quite knocked her up."

And with a pressure of the hand Durant passed Cicely over to the woman's good offices—she the while almost doubting whether he could love her—he seemed so suddenly to have become cold, almost stern.

"I will send a carriage for Lady Fleming as soon as I get back," he had continued, addressing the vicar. "In the meantime I know she is in good hands."

He was striding off when the vicar stopped him.

"One moment, Durant. I have much to say to you—that woman has been here."

"Not now, for Heaven's sake not now. I will come to-morrow, but I must get back to Fleming."

And before Mr. Burke could make any farther effort to

keep him he was gone, leaving his old friend wondering whether all the denizens of the great world gave way to excitement in the same way that these people who had lately come from London seemed to do.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SEVERING THE LINK.

Two days have elapsed since Cicely accepted a temporary refuge under the vicar's hospitable roof, for on a carriage being sent for her from the house she had declined to go back, on the plea of illness, and had remained since then an occupant of the little room she had dwelt in in old days. Her maid had come to wait on her and bring her what was necessary for her toilet, but she had remained passively in bed, in a state which seemed one of mental stupor, speaking to no one, heeding nothing that passed. To Sir Hubert's loving messages she gave no answer; to Mr. Durant's written entreaties that she would return to the Hall she was equally unresponding. She lay there like one dead to every sense. Hope and happiness had expired within her, and with them every other sensation seemed wholly extinct. She complained of no malady, no pain, for she never spoke—only lay there through the long hours of the busy day and the silent night, perfectly pulseless, inert, and prostrate, seemingly only conscious of the rest she was experiencing, but in reality dwelling on the misery which like a huge black cloud had crushed her with its gloom. Those who watched her could arrive at no conclusion as they tried to give a name to her disease, a reason for this sudden stagnation of the vital functions. Her case baffled the physicians who were sent from her husband's bedside

to look at her; it baffled the attendants who watched her hour by hour, yet saw no amelioration, no change.

"Sir Hubert has got leave from the doctors to come and see her ladyship to-morrow," the maid from the Hall had whispered to nurse Frizby. "It is scarcely fitting he should be out yet a while, but they think the sudden sight of him may bring her to a bit, poor thing."

Notwithstanding her seeming coma and the low tone in which the words were spoken they had reached Cicely's sensitive ears, and a pink flush spread itself over her cheeks as she listened.

"Sir Hubert coming here—why would they not let her be at peace—why was she ever to be hunted away from rest and quietude? He would ask her to go with him, and all that dreadful life of misery and lying would recommence."

Twilight was gathering as she had heard the maid's words, and as night drew its mantle slowly round her she still lay and pondered. At last, after a long while she seemed to notice that there were people about her—told nurse Frizby that she was better, and would like some tea and to get up for a little while. As one recovering from a long trance she slowly struggled back to life.

"Sir Hubert was coming—then rest was over!" was the keynote of her thoughts, the one idea which seemed to impel her into action.

"There is a dear pretty bird," the nurse had said, in a tone very different to the acrid one in which she used to address her. "The vicar will be quite glad to see you better. He has been that lonesome like since you have lain there; and as for Master Harry, he has been in a power of trouble—one would think his own kith and kin lay a-dying."

"Is Mr. Durant still at the Hall?" asked Cicely, looking under her pillow for her handkerchief as she spoke.

"Ay is he, nursing Sir Hubert like his own brother—so

folks say. Master Harry was always a kind-hearted lad, though a bit mischievous at times."

No wonder Cicely had cased herself in the impenetrable reserve of apparent stupor, if she did not wish to be persecuted by garrulity such as this. Now, however, she answered, "Get me some tea quickly, good Mrs. Frizby, and send Judkins with a dressing-gown. That wood-fire looks cheery; I should like to sit by it."

"Verily this was sudden resurrection and no mistake," old Frizby announced to the vicar as she went to do Cicely's bidding; but though the good man smiled at the welcome tidings, he failed to ascribe a reason for the change, nor, in fact, sought for one beyond the capricious vagaries of illness. Half an hour later, when Cicely, in her pretty gown, was seated by the fire, the vicar came to pay her a little visit, and was more hopeful and happy about "the child" than he had been since she came to Swinton. She appeared tranquil and calm, as if the feverish excitement she had contracted of late had passed away and left a healthier spirit in its place. Nurse Frizby puts her head in while they are still enjoying their *tête-à-tête*.

"Master Harry is downstairs inquiring after her ladyship," she announces.

"Shall he come up?" asks the vicar, turning to Cicely. "He will be better able to report favourably of you to Sir Hubert."

"No," she says. "I am not strong enough to see more visitors to-day. Tell Mr. Durant I thank him, but I cannot see him." And either the firelight or the hot blood makes the pallid waxen features all aglow with a crimson hue.

The vicar goes down to speak to Durant and nurse Frizby is despatched with a request from Lady Fleming to leave her for a little while, as she is very tired. Once alone, Cicely's head falls languidly against the side of the

chair, and hot tears course each other rapidly down her cheeks.

"It must be. I alone must sever this fearful link—I alone must free myself from the charm some evil fairy has cast over me."

And then she gets up and wanders about the room in a restless sort of way, arranging things as she does so—not as if a spirit of tidiness had moved her, but as if her thoughts were rambling far away and her fingers were acting without guidance. Strange that several articles of dress should find their way into a small handbag Judkins had brought from the Hall and had thrown in the corner when she had emptied it, and that when filled it should be thrust under the bed, while Cicely pursues her desultory walk and makes farther minute arrangements in the distribution of her effects. At last, exhausted, she sinks once more into the armchair, and is to all appearance half-asleep, when nurse Frizby brings in "a tempting morsel for her ladyship's supper." Cicely rouses herself with an effort, and eats as though she relishes the good woman's dainties.

"I have not had so much appetite for days," she says, with a smile. "No, no more, thank you, Mrs. Frizby; but you may put something by my bedside, in case I am hungry in the night; and neither you nor Judkins need sit up. I will ring if I want anything. Judkins has gone up to the Hall? Ah, so much the better. She was not of much use here—not so good a nurse as you are. But go to bed, there is a good soul. I am ever so much better to-night."

Mrs. Frizby would not allow herself to be dismissed till she saw her ladyship comfortably tucked up, and everything that she could possibly want put close at hand. Then she left her, and shortly afterwards the vicarage became stilled and quiet; for its inmates, who had been anxious and wakeful when Cicely was ill, now slept the

heavy sleep which undisturbed thoughts can alone produce. And Lady Fleming herself? She lay there passively, with wide-open eyes—waiting—watching for the dawn.

“Would it never come?”

Ah, how many a sick and ailing one has asked that question before! And when it does at last arrive what does it not infrequently bring?—a troublous day, more to be dreaded in its events than were the monotonous hours of the lazily creeping night.

It came at last, with its grey tints deepening gradually into light through the casement window, the blind of which Cicely had requested nurse Frizby to draw up, and she lay and looked at it till at last every object in the room became discernible; then she rose, dressed herself slowly—for her trembling fingers had but little power—put on the hat she had worn during that last walk with Durant, drew the handbag from its hiding-place beneath the bed, and seemed quite ready for a start. Yet it was on no unholy mission she was bent, for before she left the room which had proved such a peaceful retreat for her, she knelt and breathed a silent prayer.

A few minutes more and she had gone down the oaken staircase, from whence when she paused she could hear the heavy breathing of the slumbering inmates; then she carefully unbolted the outer door and stood inhaling the fresh, keen air of the early morn. The oxygen seems to have renewed her force, for she trips briskly along, and is quickly out of sight of the vicarage and the village. She does not meet a creature, but pursues her way to the railway station, where a young porter, totally unknown to her, is the only being on guard.

“When does the next train go to London, if you please?” she asks, timidly.

“Next up? Seven-fifteen.”

She looks at her watch. Twenty minutes to wait. She goes on to the platform and takes out the few sand-

wiches nurse Frizby had put by her bedside and eats them, more because she feels her strength must be coaxed than because she is really hungry. What, however, would she not have given for a cup of warm coffee! She sends the strange porter for her ticket—fearing recognition from the other officials—and in less than three-quarters of an hour from the time she left the vicarage is rattling up to London at the rate of forty miles an hour.

“Lady Fleming is gone—whither?” Is the question the vicar and nurse Frizby ask each other, when an hour later her absence is first discovered.

“To the Hall, of course—she has made immediate use of her returned strength to go at once and see Sir Hubert. It was a foolish, rash proceeding, but young things are impetuous, and Cicely is no exception.”

Thus they settled the matter, and made no inquiries till some time later, when Judkins arrived with the intelligence that her ladyship had certainly not come up there. Then the vicar’s brow grew dark, for he feared evil, though in what form he scarcely knew; yet, though he of late years had had but little intercourse with the world, he was a prudent man and kept his thoughts to himself. He bade the two women remain indoors and make no clamour about Cicely’s disappearance, while he himself went up to the Hall in search of Harry Durant.

Yes, he had misjudged him; there at his “post of observation,” watching the gradual recovery of his friend, he found Mr. Durant. But where was Cicely?

Durant’s look of startled horror as he asked this question of him once more shook the vicar’s confidence, but it was speedily restored; for Durant, at once seeing the imminent peril of the situation, resolved to make light of it, and said, with a forced laugh—

“A whimsical little woman is Lady Fleming. I dare say she has gone to get the London house ready for Sir Hubert—she talked of doing so the other day.”

"Whimsical with a vengeance," retorted the vicar, who had but little patience with such vagaries. "It would have been better if she had stayed here to nurse him, as a wife should."

"She hates Mrs. Bertrand, who is always reminding her of what she was once," said Durant in excuse. "I agree with you, it is awkward when a self-willed woman will not allow herself to be controlled by reason. But we must make the best of it. Perhaps it will be wiser not to let Fleming know she has gone—at any rate not at present—he is so very excitable."

"Well, you seem to understand all about it, my dear boy; so I suppose it is all right. We country folk don't do such wild things. At all events you think there is no cause for anxiety?"

"None in the least—why should there be?"

"That you know best, Durant. I have my suspicions whether Cicely altogether cares for Sir Hubert."

"A mere fancy on your part, I assure you, my dear Burke—their matrimonial relations are of the happiest."

"Humph! They have an odd way of showing it. Don't you think one of us had better go up to town and bring this young woman back to what I, with my old-fashioned ideas, should call her duty? You are a younger, more active man than I am: suppose you were to go?"

"I! Not for the whole world would I stir from this place on such an errand; and as for you, Burke, you have not been in London for so long, it would only bother you. Go and write her a homily; it will answer every purpose."

"You take the affair uncommonly coolly, I must say," said the vicar, who was more perplexed by Durant's view of the case than he had even been by the fact of Cicely's sudden flight.

"We live, my dear fellow, we children of the nineteenth

century, and life goes so fast, we have no time to speculate over the whys and wherefores of a woman's whims. Still for all that I think a sermon from you will not harm this little lady. In the meantime—excuse me, and don't think me rude—Fleming is waiting for me to write letters for him, and invalids are impatient."

Thus dismissed, what could the vicar do but return forthwith to the vicarage, but little satisfied at heart by the cavalier way Durant treated what to him seemed a most extraordinary and unjustifiable proceeding? Could he have seen his old pupil pacing rapidly through the shrubbery walks some ten minutes later, he might have learnt from his face how much of acting and how little truth there had been in that last interview between them. That Cicely had gone to Campden Hill, Harry Durant did not for a moment believe.

"Where had she gone, and what rash step was she about to take?" were the questions which at that moment he would have given his life to solve. Yet he dared not stir—his absence from Swinton would, he felt, involve her reputation irreparably. The only chance of happiness in the future lay in the fact of their being apart at this moment being proved unmistakeably. "Thank God he was at Swinton with the Bertrands; thus his dear aunt's slanderous tongue could not vilify Cicely's name on his account. Yet something must be done. Where could she be? She must be found at once. Algy Duncombe!" He had had a letter from him that very morning, telling him all the particulars of his interview with Miss Wilson. Durant had been brooding irritably over its contents when the vicar was announced—now he would utilise the subject. For a second he went back to the house.

"Beg Sir Hubert not to leave his room till I return," he said to the valet, and then strode off once again through the shrubbery walks past the lodge, taking the short cut through the wood to the telegraph office.

"Come down by the 12.20 and talk the matter over—most important," was the message which the electric wires bore to Algy Duncombe, just as he was finishing his eleven o'clock breakfast.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNTER VIER AUGEN.

"I CAME off at such a tremendous rate that I left my baccy behind. Can you provide that 'fusiform spiral-wound bundle of chopped stems and miscellaneous incombustibles, the cigar?'" And Algy Duncombe jumped on to the platform at the Swinton station and hit Durant, who was standing moodily at a little distance, familiarly on the back. The expression of his friend's face, however, checked him, and he changed his tone. "By Jove—there is something up—what is it, old fellow?"

"More than I should care to acknowledge to any man save yourself; but I believe you are to be trusted, Algy." And he wrung the boy's extended hand with an amount of warmth that was almost painful.

"To the death—when you are concerned," was the ready answer. "I regret, though, that the intelligence I thought it right to send you has such grave importance."

"That has but little to do with the present matter. Let us get away from here and stroll down the lane, where we can talk freely."

Algy, completely sobered out of his usual facetiousness by Durant's grave manner, followed without speaking; and having lighted the cigar Durant had given him, the two men walked on for a few paces in silence.

When quite out of hearing of the idlers about the

railway station Durant said in a low tone, which he strove to render deep and calm—

“Cicely has gone away; she left for London by the 7.15 train this morning.”

“Well?” asked the other, who as yet saw nothing special in the announcement, save that he himself should not have cared to start before the world was aired. “Well?”

“I count on you to go after her—find her, and bring her to reason. Fleming as yet knows nothing of what has happened.”

“Good heavens, Durant, can I believe my ears?” cried Algy, to whom Deb’s insinuations came with a sudden rush. “Then there is some truth in the reports I have heard.”

“Not a word—believe nothing, listen to nothing. Be silent and act, if you have any regard for Cicely—for me.”

“But I cannot act. Unless I know what has happened I shall only make a jumble of the whole affair. Why has Lady Fleming gone away?”

“From a false idea that she has betrayed her husband’s honour,” answered Durant, with a groan.

“*False!* You are quite sure, then, that it is false?”

Durant stopped and glared at him wildly.

“By G— man, you do not think it could be true—you have not such a base opinion of her purity and my integrity as to imagine this thing could be possible?”

“Forgive me, Durant—forgive me; but I don’t clearly understand. Your moral standard and mine may not be quite the same, you see. I am a loose fish and a naughty boy, so the world says, yet I should not mind learning how far a man may go with his friend’s wife without infringing on the laws honour prescribes.”

“If you have only come here to jeer and turn the whole matter into ridicule the sooner you return to town

the better, and I will find some one else to help me out of this mess," said Durant angrily.

"You totally misunderstand me—I attach far too much importance to the case to dream of ridicule," replied Algy, with an amount of dignity for which few of his companions would have given him credit. "A few months since Lady Fleming and I established a bond of brotherly and sisterly regard which was to last for life. As her brother, I ask of you now for an account of your late conduct, and how much you have been to blame in this matter."

"Algy, spare me. I did not say I was not to blame," cried Durant, who in his excitement grew abject and angry by turns; "I only said that no real harm had been done. Mad, insensate words may have been spoken, but pray God that they may be forgotten. Margaret—Mrs. Fitzalan—is the she-devil who has planned and brought about this misery; she it was who came down here a few days since, met us walking by the mill-dam, and opened Cicely's eyes to a sense of her own peril."

Algy puffed his cigar vigorously for a few seconds.

"Curse that woman!" he said at last. "I always thought she was a devil incarnate. So on the strength of that Lady Fleming has run away?"

"She could not bear to meet Fleming again; she said she would rather go to the ends of the earth alone than feel his eyes were on her."

"Foolish! What d—— foolish things some people will do! Here is a hornets' nest she has dragged down on herself! and, you say, all for nothing."

"I swear to you, as I am a living man, that I would rather die here at your feet than that one hair of Cicely's innocent head should be injured."

"Oh, that is all very fine; but if you had not cared quite so much about her innocent head perhaps a good deal of this botheration might have been saved."

"True. Yet it was hard to see the girl you loved

taken from before your very eyes and married off to another man at Mrs. Fitzalan's bidding."

"Knowing that you loved her before she married Fleming, I am all with you," said Algy. "If I thought you had been sneaking into the home circle since, I should be far more severe. Fleming being the interloper makes all the difference in the case. You know I started by saying my code of morals was not high."

"So it seems. For my part I blame myself more. Knowing, as I did, my own feelings and suspecting Cicely's, I ought never to have visited at Fleming's house. But this discussion avails but little now. The question is, what is to be done? for I look to you, Algy, and you only, to help both her and me through this dilemma."

"That is jolly hearing; for if I make a mistake I suppose I shall have to bear the brunt of the whole business. Never mind, I am pretty callous. Go on; give me every particular."

In a few succinct words Durant gave the details, Algy calmly smoking the while and digesting all he heard.

"I see," he said at last. "Of course you must stop here, old fellow, and throw as much dust as possible in Fleming's eyes. It is a mercy he is tied by the leg. Keep him as ill as you can till you hear from me. I wonder where the deuce that little girl can have gone? Lady Susan would have been the right form, but she is up in Scotland. I dare say I shall find her sitting calmly, waiting the issue of events, in her own drawing-room at Campden Hill. I'll telegraph if she is there."

"For Heaven's sake mind what you telegraph in this country place."

"My dear fellow, trust me for ambiguity. Half an hour till the next train starts. Don't get in a fever, my dear Durant. It will be all right; only, for a sensible man like you, I must say you have made a horrid mull. So Mrs. Fitz is a lodge-keeper's daughter after all! You'll

commend me for discernment, won't you? I can't think what the deuce you took up with such a woman for."

"She was my first love in days gone by, when we were boy and girl together. Old Peter gave her a first-rate education, and intended her for a governess."

"And you, I suppose, philandered with her and then jilted her for higher game; hence this present imbroglio?" said Algy, laughing.

"On the contrary. She went as governess to Burke's children—they were all living then. There she met Fitzalan—he was a Yankee connection of Burke's wife. From what was passing between them I imagined my attentions were not appreciated, and I withdrew them."

"Having grown somewhat tired of the young woman," suggested Algy, parenthetically.

"Somebody—my aunt, I believe," went on Durant, without heeding the interruption—"gave Burke a hint that his governess' principles were not altogether of the strictest, and he dismissed her. She wrote me a letter, blaming me for what she chose to call her loss of 'place and name.' I did not answer it, and soon after I heard she had gone to America—I supposed with Fitzalan."

"Your little episodes with women don't seem to have been very successful, my dear fellow. When did this bright specimen of the frail sex come back from America?"

"That I scarcely know. I next heard of her flaunting her ill-gotten wealth in Paris, under the name of Mrs. Fitzalan."

"And you did not attempt to prevent society from being humbugged into a belief in her virtues?"

"There are wheels within wheels, my dear Algy. Some years ago, when Peter and I were smoking our pipes on the bridge above the old mill-dam, we heard a young child's cry, and on going to see whence it came we found a little creature of about three years old, warmly wrapped up, lying in a sort of package—half cradle, half

basket. We looked at each other in some perplexity, for what to do we knew not. Where it could have come from or why it had been put there were questions we could not solve. 'I'll take it home to my fireside,' said the old man at last. 'Since Madge left me it has been a lonesome one.' And he took the child up in his arms. It clung to him and began to laugh. The same idea seized us both: had Margaret brought this child and left it almost at her father's door? We neither of us ever discovered the truth; but from that hour Cicely learnt to call the old man Grand-dad."

"And is Lady Fleming Mrs. Fitzalan's daughter?" asked Algy, aghast at Durant's tale.

"No, a thousand times no!" thundered the other, angrily. "Do you think so much gentleness and purity could exist in Margaret Denham's child?"

"Well, not exactly, perhaps. But why the deuce, then, did Mrs. Fitz have anything to do with launching the young woman into the great world?"

"It was a mistake, my boy. I who made it have never ceased to regret it. When I saw Cicely on my return from Italy I felt perfectly certain from the likeness that she was Fitzalan's daughter. I was also perfectly certain that the so-called Mrs. Fitzalan was spending in Paris the money that by some means she had obtained from him. Peter died at that identical time. I went off to Paris to see what could be arranged for the girl. Margaret swore by every saint in and out of the calendar that the child was not hers, but consented to adopt her, on condition that I made no allusions to her past life, nor allowed the Parisian world to believe that her birth had been a low one. How in the name of wonder she escaped recognition from my sharp-sighted aunt has been a marvel to me to this hour."

"Well, it is the queerest story I have heard for some time, and one in which I should have thought a shrewd man like you would scarcely have intermeddled."

"Oh, it would all have worked well enough if Margaret had not allowed her jealous passions to overrule her common sense."

"Or if you had not lost your head by falling in love with Cicely, eh? By Jove, Durant, but you must have a devilish queer opinion of women if you think an old love is likely to help you to win a new one."

"My love for her had died out—I imagined her old passion for me had done so too. I was mistaken—that is all—and I have had to pay for it no one knows how dearly."

There was a short pause; and then Algy, whose curiosity almost overbalanced his friendly regard, asked—

"Have you, then, never discovered who Lady Fleming's parents are?"

"From Miss Wilson, yes; but only lately. She gave me some proofs which involved Margaret in so felonious a scheme that I almost regretted I had ever learnt its nature. In a weak moment, to save Cicely's reputation from her caustic tongue, I allowed her to burn them. But a truce to the discussion of her infamies; I am in no mood for dwelling on them—the point at issue is too grave."

"My dear fellow, it will be all right as long as you stay on here. Only look chirpy—if you seem all wrong people are sure to suspect there is something up. There is the bell—I am off to town. By the way, how is May? Give her my love."

"I will, I will. I only wish my aunt was amenable to reason on that subject, Algy. I have learnt only too bitterly of late the misery that arises from interference."

They shook hands warmly as Algy jumped into the train, each determined to do the best he could for the other according as circumstances should arise.

It was already long past the usual luncheon hour at the Hall, but Durant was too heavy at heart to hasten his movements. The idea of meeting all the chattering

laughing party assembled round his uncle's table bored him; and though he felt it would be wiser to go and be as one of them, yet the inclination to dawdle along the road and allow his thoughts to have their uncontrolled range was too strong to be resisted. Half-way through the little wood he met dumb Molly. He had not seen her since Peter's death, and the sudden apparition now came to him as an evil omen. Strong man though he was, it was strange how recent events and a sort of inner consciousness of wrong made him at times almost womanish in his fears and doubts. To communicate with Molly was no easy matter, but Durant had known her since he was a boy, and so, more or less, understood her signs and almost unintelligible sounds. On the present occasion it was obvious she wished him to follow her, and she led him through the tortuous windings of the wood to the tree beneath which Peter had been found by Cicely on the night preceding his death. In the trunk of the tree there was a huge cavity extending downwards farther than the arm could conveniently reach. Molly took a long stick which was near, and, putting it into the opening, knocked violently on some hard substance which lay at the bottom. She then gave him the stick, as though bidding him do the same. It was clear from the sound that there was something there beyond the mere crumbings of nature, but how to arrive at discovering what it was was not so easy? He tore a piece of paper from his note-book and began a short cross-examination of old Molly.

"When did you discover this?" he wrote.

"Monday," she answered, writing slowly in a large text hand.

"How?" he next asked.

"*She* came," was the answer.

"Did she find anything?"

"No."

"You succeeded when she failed?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Peter's hoard."

"How do you know?"

"I have seen him here."

"At this exact spot?"

"In the wood—I did not know where till Monday."

"He was found dying here?"

"Yes, I found him."

"You struck him, I suppose, to get his gold?"

"No, no, no." And old Molly grew so violently excited that the writing was almost illegible.

He asked no farther questions for the moment, but proceeded to reach, if possible, whatever it was that was deposited in the trunk of the old tree.

After much difficulty, by means of a crooked stick, he succeeded in partially raising what appeared to be a small tin box—then, after various unsuccessful attempts, he brought it up sufficiently near the surface to touch it with his hand.

It was an old-fashioned cash-box, partly wrapped in brown paper, which decay and damp had more than half destroyed, but on which the word "Margaret" had not been wholly erased. The box was locked; and as Mr. Durant felt by no means justified in wrenching it open, neither his curiosity nor Molly's as to its contents was likely to be satisfied.

"Had she murdered the old man, knowing of this hoard?" he wondered to himself. "But if so why had she not possessed herself of it before?"

It was a fresh tangle of circumstances, and one during the unwinding of which he would most gladly have refused to hold the skein; but to attempt avoidance in meddling with these matters—*cui bono*? They pursued him with unceasing pertinacity. The vicar should have his share of this new annoyance, however, and to the vicarage he

forthwith conducted dumb Molly and carried the tin box.

Mr. Burke, from long usage and a knowledge of the dumb alphabet, communicated readily with Molly, and soon elicited the real facts of the case, of which Mr. Durant had only succeeded in obtaining a vague outline. Molly had watched Mrs. Fitzalan wandering about, in search evidently of something in the little wood. She had remembered how Peter had not unfrequently groped here of old, and had at last fallen at the foot of the old tree. This had set her wondering and investigating till she had found the secret hiding-place, in the discovery of which the daughter had failed.

"Was it to look for that box Margaret came to Swinton?" asked Mr. Durant.

"Probably. She said the papers I delivered to her—by request, a year after her father's death—failed to provide a correct account and were worthless, but she did not say for what she was searching. Only that she believed the whole thing to be a myth—an hallucination of the old man's brain. He was so strange and doting of late that I was inclined to agree with her."

"Peter, up to his last hour, was as clear as you or I," answered Durant. "Do you think that woman," pointing to Molly, "had aught to do with his death?"

"No—a thousand times no. I think he died from natural causes, like many a miser gloating over his hoards. Strange he should have left them to Margaret! She has the key of that box."

"Yet his last words were of Cicely," murmured Mr. Durant.

"Ay, my dear Harry, but blood is thicker than water—Margaret was his child."

"Thank God, Lady Fleming is of another race," said Durant, fervently. "But I must be off. Into your hands I commit the box. You had better write to that arch-fiend

Margaret—I wish to have no intercourse with her. Here, Molly.” And he tossed the old woman a sovereign, smiling, notwithstanding his preoccupation of mind, at the bright light that shone in the dim old eyes which had not gazed on gold this many a day.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TWO WOMEN.

THE clock was on the stroke of eight as Cicely got out of the train at the Charing Cross station. She stood for a moment, bag in hand, and looked round almost hopelessly. Where was she going? Had she formed any definite plans when she so rashly made up her mind to see if it were possible to run away from misery? Wretched girl, was she not rather plunging more deeply into a maze of difficulties from which even her best friends would find it nearly impossible to extricate her? But she had asked no advice, taken no kindly counsel, and for the first time in her life she found herself alone in the whirl of London, with the forlorn sensation that no one knew where to find her, even if they cared to do so. Oppressed by this thought and by the general sense of dreariness which hung over her, she stood irresolute.

“Four-wheeler, mum—do you want a four-wheeler?” asked a civil porter. But Cicely had by no means made up her mind, and having arrived in town, had almost determined to get into the next train and go back again into the country.

A hand is laid on her shoulder.

“Cicely! and alone? Has *he* forsaken you, as he forsook me in the old days?”

Cicely shook from head to foot. The last person she had expected or wished to meet was Mrs. Fitzalan.

"Nay, child, don't be foolish. You may have worse friends than I am. I have no spite against you—only against *him*. Where is he?"

With an effort Cicely sought to regain composure and collect her ideas, for both seemed to have deserted her on the instant at the sight of this woman, whom she had learnt so thoroughly to dread—whose words had been ringing in her ears ever since the meeting by the mill-dam.

"Who do you mean? What do you mean?" she asked, falteringly.

"Oh, you know perfectly what I mean. But come into the hotel close by. You look faint and exhausted. I will order breakfast."

"Breakfast with you, Mrs. Fitzalan?"

"Why not, silly one? It will not be the first time. I had intended starting for Paris by a train which goes in a few minutes; but a conversation with you will be more profitable for us both, so I will defer my departure till the evening. It is only another of those little turns at the caprice of fate to which we both seem liable, my love. Have you any servants waiting here? If so, tell them you are going to breakfast with me."

"I am quite alone," murmured Cicely, thoroughly ashamed of the position in which she had placed herself.

"Indeed! Strange travelling for Sir Hubert Fleming's wife," Mrs. Fitzalan said as she led the way into the hotel. "I imagined he would have taken more care of you."

"He knows nothing of the matter—is in bed ill."

Mrs. Fitzalan looked at her fixedly for a moment.

"Cicely, is it possible that you have come here to meet Durant? Take my advice: go back, child, before it is too late. I am what most of your friends would call a vile intriguing adventuress. It may be so; but, believe me, I

have lived too much in the world not to have learnt that it is dangerous to break the prescribed laws of conventionality."

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how can you talk to me like this?" said Cicely, growing hysterical from weakness and emotion. "I only want to be good and faithful. I ran away because I was afraid to stay down there—afraid Sir Hubert would discover how wicked I have been; and now you twit me for trying to do what is right. It is all your fault that I am so miserable. If you had not insisted on my marrying Sir Hubert things would have come straight at last."

"I have no doubt they would," answered the other, mockingly. "I should have had the supreme felicity of seeing you the wife of my old lover. But wait till we get some breakfast, and we will discuss the matter more freely."

And so in a private room at the Charing Cross Hotel these two sat together; and Cicely let Mrs. Fitzalan make what arrangements she listed, looking very dreamy and thoughtful the while.

"Mr. Durant your lover!" she said at last, when they were once more alone. "Mrs. Fitzalan, I never knew anything of this."

"I dare say not—how should you? Before you were even born he had professed an attachment for me, and received in return a love as faithful and devoted as was ever lavished on man."

"Good gracious, how dreadful! And I have been made to suffer for this!"

"Yes, poor child, you have suffered through loving him. Perhaps, too, it was part of a heritage of hate transferred to you from your dead father—for he it was who stood between Harry Durant and me."

"My father!"

"Yes, Stephen Fitzalan. He came to Swinton as a guest while I was governess at Mr. Burke's, admired me,

and talked nonsense, which irritated Mr. Durant till he grew jealous and would hear no reason. I was persecuted by his family—I believed then at his instance—turned out of my situation, reviled, contemned as good for nothing. When I appealed to him he treated me with scorn—left my letters unanswered. I have learnt since that Mrs. Bertrand, who dreaded his making a low marriage, which she called an alliance with me, had the most vilifying reports circulated about me. To think that he believed them is gall and wormwood to me now—it maddened me then till it turned my heart to stone, and rendered me callous to every principle of right and wrong. I swore I would never be the dupe of another man, nor again allow my blighted feelings to ripen into affection; and both in letter and in spirit I have kept my word.”

“Poor Mrs. Fitzalan—I am so sorry—I wish I could have helped you.”

“Tush, girl, I want no pity—let me go on. Under the influence of the despair from which I could not free myself I forsook my poor old father, left England without bidding good-bye to any one, and went to America, accompanied only by Mary Wilson, who had once been a servant of the Burkes, and was a Swinton woman. After striving with fortune for six months, chance led me one day into the same street as Stephen Fitzalan. We stopped and spoke. I hated him with a deep and bitter hatred for the wrong he had unwittingly caused me; but hunger is sometimes stronger than hate. He had, it seemed, a wife in America, though he had never vouchsafed to inform us of the fact during his temporary residence in England, or what mischief might he not have averted!—a wife and child. That child, Cicely, was yourself.”

“I? Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, why did you not tell me this before?”

“Because it did not suit my plans, little one. But the fight is nearly over now. You may as well know the

truth. I have had my revenge on Harry Durant, and for the rest it matters but little."

"And my mother—my father—are they still alive?"

"They were both drowned by the upsetting of a boat at New London."

"Ah!" sighed Cicely, on whose aching heart a ray of joy seemed to have descended as she for a moment hoped there were yet those left on earth who would love her as one's own kith and kin only can love. "And grand-dad," she said, after a moment's pause, "was he not my grand-dad after all? Yet I did love him so!"

"For his sake, child, I would save you from yourself now. You took mine, the daughter's place, by him. In return I will keep you in the straight path—if it be possible."

The good there is latent in every human heart, however evil, was awakened in Margaret Denham as she thought of her dead father and the hard neglect with which she had treated him.

"But how did I come there? Why are you Mrs. Fitzalan?" Cicely asked, totally at a loss to comprehend how these things came about.

Mrs. Fitzalan looked down, twitching her hands nervously as they lay in her lap, and after a moment's consideration said, in a low tone, "That which followed your father and mother's death is the darkest chapter in the history of my past life—the only episode of which I am ashamed—whatever Mr. Durant in his wrath may say to the contrary. They were both drowned at New London, as I have told you. You, their child, and I, who had been appointed half-governess, half-nurse in charge of you, were saved. It was another of those freaks of fate in which we have shared, Cicely."

"Never mind fate—I hate to think it can influence me," cried Cicely, shivering.

"We were carried into a warm, comfortable inn, given

dry clothes, and tended. We were all strangers in those parts—had simply gone there for a summer's outing. The people by whom we were surrounded mistook me for the wife instead of the governess and addressed me as Mrs. Fitzalan. One only of the party who had been saved knew the truth, a certain M. Barbier, whose acquaintance I had made at New York. I offered no word of contradiction, and hours grew into days, till, partly at M. Barbier's instigation, partly to fill the purse which this accident had once more emptied, I resolved to accept the name and title of the dead, M. Barbier promising, on receiving his share of the profits, to make all the necessary arrangements for proving my identity."

"And yet after taking my mother's name you deserted me," said Cicely. "Her friends—why did they never claim me?"

"She was an orphan, with no near relations—this I knew; and as I started with you for Europe as soon as I could, leaving M. Barbier to arrange all business details, friends had not much opportunity for making inquiries. Mary Wilson came with us; I dared not leave her behind—she knew too much of the truth. Like myself, she was poor, and amenable to my authority through bribery, but I felt I must have her under my own eye, and I was right—she has thrown off my influence for that of Harry Durant now."

"How so? What has Mr. Durant to do with the matter?"

"Listen and do not interrupt. We took a lodging in London together, we three—you and I and Wilson—and for a time I was half-disposed to keep you with me. Your prattle amused me, and your pretty ways calmed my conscience and made me almost believe that I had done no wrong. But Mr. Durant's image came between us then, as it has done later. A living child whose parentage I dared not acknowledge, would it not be providing a proof

that his suspicions in the past had not been without foundation? and on a sudden one day I resolved to part with you, at whatever cost. Mary Wilson promised to arrange for your future and took you to Swinton. That poor old father found you and made a pet of you was one of your good chances, child—it was not of my arranging.”

“It was a happy chance, Mrs. Fitzalan, for I had a glad and joyous childhood; but the sunshine has all gone now.”

“Nonsense, Cicely, don’t get maudlin; let me finish my story. When your good star shone my evil one was in the ascendant. Harry Durant was with father when he found you, where Mary Wilson had put you, by the old mill-dam. He ferreted about till he traced her as the depositor of the child; followed her to London, sought to discover if I were the baby’s mother, and to her positive negative scarcely seemed to give a symptom of credence. She was true to me then, and did not give him particulars as to what had happened. But gradual degeneration produces ruin at the last. Mary Wilson is now in Mr. Durant’s pay, and it is useless for me longer to conceal the truth. The capital I have been spending for years was yours, and I am a pauper at your feet.”

“Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, you have been kind to me—though you have done me also a deep and bitter wrong. But I will not be uncharitable and vindictive; God knows I want charity and loving kindness myself. Keep the money as long as you live, and let there be peace between us.”

“There is none to keep.” And Mrs. Fitzalan laughed a mocking laugh, which startled Cicely by its hollowness. “Letters received from Paris yesterday inform me that M. Barbier has gone off with all my papers and every available franc that he could realize.”

“How awful!—how dreadful!” said Cicely. “Is there such a thing as right-mindedness and integrity on earth?”

“Set the example of it, child, by keeping in the straight

way yourself. Confidence demands confidence in return. Where were you going when I met you?"

"I don't know. Anywhere, only away," answered Cicely, sorrowfully.

"Nonsense. You may be foolish and silly and in love, but I don't believe you could be so idiotic as to wander out into the world without a purpose and a destination."

"It is true, though. I didn't quite know where to go; I only wanted to avoid seeing Sir Hubert's melancholy eyes; and I knew I dared not meet Mr. Durant again after all that had been said, so I ran away."

"Thinking, I suppose, that he would be frantic at your disappearance, and would forthwith come and look for you?"

"Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how wicked you are! I never thought such a thing."

"Well, the world will if you did not; and what the world will say is the verdict which influences most people's morality. My advice to you is to go back—of course you can follow it or not as you please. Send Durant out into the desert—he is more able to languish there than you are. Why should you play Hagar for him? A little banishment will do him good—teach him that other people have feelings as well as he has."

"Please—please—don't talk like that. It makes me so unhappy. I don't know what to do; but I can't go back to face everybody and answer all their questions; I have not the strength."

"Well, you look rather washed-out and powerless. If you really will not go back I suppose I must stay with you. You certainly are not fit to be left alone."

"You, Mrs. Fitzalan, I thought you were on your way to Paris."

"One place is the same as another now all the cash is gone. The wreck old Barbier has left behind will no doubt be quite as valuable in a day or two."

If anything would have made Lady Fleming return to Swinton it would have been the horror she felt at Mrs. Fitzalan's self-imposed presence, but she was too tired and ill to move, much less to make up her mind what was best to be done.

She lay back in her armchair and thought. Was it all a dream? The walk by the mill-dam—her flight to town—the strange tale she had just heard—that woman's presence—the fusty, dark private sitting-room at the hotel—could any of it be real? If so, how was it all to end, and why did not death come to release her from the burden of knowledge, freighted with which she would never be able to sail her bark steadily along the waters of life?

"When you have rested we will decide for the next step," Mrs. Fitzalan had said, after a very long silence. "In the meantime this is as good a place as any—only hotels are expensive. As you have run away from Sir Hubert, and the money has run away from us both, we must be careful."

"I wish you would go to Paris and leave me to take care of myself," said Cicely, with some irritation.

"Always that little lingering hope that Durant will come to look for you, and I shall be in the way," retorted her companion, with a sneer.

Cicely started up.

"You have no right to talk to me like this. I never wish to see Mr. Durant again, or I should not be here now."

"Indeed! Well, never mind; you shall not be teased. Lie down on that sofa and go to sleep. I dare say something will happen before the day is out to arrange our plans for us."

Cicely, whose head ached, and whose legs shook so that she was obliged to catch at a chair for support when she had sprung up to make her little speech to Mrs. Fitzalan, sank down on the sofa to which she was led, and for a

time, at all events, was totally powerless to exert her free agency.

"If any one asks for Lady Fleming show them in," Mrs. Fitzalan whispered to the waiter, who came in for the breakfast things, "and bring me the morning papers," she added aloud.

But Cicely heeded neither order—she had fallen from sheer exhaustion into a restless, dreamy sleep, muttering every now and then incoherent words and sentences of which Mrs. Fitzalan fully understood the meaning, and wondered what construction Sir Hubert would put on them if he heard them. For hours Cicely lay there while Mrs. Fitzalan read her papers, wrote letters, busied herself in various ways; never, however, leaving the room, lest the girl might wake and take her departure.

It is nearly four o'clock when the door opens and the waiter, according to orders, shows in a gentleman.

"Algy Duncombe—always Algy Duncombe," mutters Mrs. Fitzalan to herself.

Query: would she have kept guard so steadily over Cicely had she not expected another passage-at-arms with Durant?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EYE-DUST

"ALGY at the station, talking to cousin Harry! Oh, Rose, you must be mistaken. He would not come to Swinton without seeing me. Besides, I believe he is far too much afraid of mamma to come here at all." And May got very pink and white by turns as she stood on the great staircase at the Hall and talked in whispered tones to her sister.

"It is true though, Mr. Seton told me. They seemed

in very earnest conversation, so he did not go up to speak to them, but he distinctly saw Algy get into the train and go off."

"Then he is sure not to come here. I wonder what it is all about?" mused May.

"About Cicely, I fancy," answered Rose, in a very low tone. "There is something wrong, I am sure, because everybody looks mysterious, and as if they thought it necessary to walk on tiptoe."

"Nonsense, Rose. You have always got a plot in your head. The house has seemed very quiet ever since Sir Hubert was taken ill and all our parties were put off."

"Oh, it is not that, for he is better—sitting up in the little boudoir. Mamma has been in there talking to him for more than half an hour."

"Perhaps Cicely is very ill?" suggested May.

"Perhaps," repeated Rose, very slowly, but as though she were better informed and did not believe in her illness.

The two girls leant over the bannisters and looked down into the hall for a minute or two without speaking; then Rose went on—

"Cousin Harry was always fond of Cicely—you know I told you so in Paris."

"Oh, but she is married now," answered May.

"Ye-es," said the other, as though she doubted the effect matrimony had on people's feelings.

"Rose, I hate you when you get mysterious and full of horrid insinuations. Why can't you speak plainly?"

"Because it does not do to speak unless one is quite sure—which I am not."

"Sure of what?"

"Well, May dear, you have eyes—why don't you use them, as I do? But never mind, come upstairs, and let us try on our new hats."

"Bother the new hats! There is no one worth wearing them for in this dismal place."

"Heigh-ho for Algy!" laughed her sister, who, amused by her own flirtation with Mr. Seton, did not enter into May's feelings.

Before they reached the upper landing they were overtaken by Harry Durant, who had just returned from his interview with Mr. Duncombe and the subsequent finding of the tin box. He sped past them without seemingly noticing that they were there, and going into the little boudoir where Sir Hubert was sitting, closed the door behind him without looking round.

"There; I told you something was wrong," said Rose. "Cousin Harry is never bearish unless he is vexed."

"As long as nothing has happened to Algy I don't care," murmured May. "What can it be, though?" And they went along the corridor wondering.

Mrs. Bertrand had been in the village that morning what she called "visiting." That is, she had been giving lectures on ventilation and domestic economy to the cottagers, and receiving from them an equivalent in gossip. Since her return she had been closeted alone for half an hour with Sir Hubert. Given these facts, what need of speculation as to the amount of flame that had been fanned up? The doves alone, perhaps, would judge their mother mildly. The squire, who had met his nephew at the door and warned him as to what he might expect, had spoken perhaps more sharply of his wife than the good benevolent man had ever been known to do before.

Sir Hubert was lying on a small sofa by the window when Durant entered the room. His countenance, always pale, was ghastly even to lividness; and to Durant's question—"How are you, Fleming, now you are up and dressed?" he only answered with a groan, and then muttered the word "Cicely" between his teeth.

"I believe she went to town this morning, but I know nothing beyond what report says."

"You know nothing, Durant? I did not believe you

would have deceived me thus. Why did you let me marry her, knowing all the time of the love there was between you ? ”

“ My dear Fleming, who has told you this ? It is mere gossip of Mrs. Bertrand’s fabrication.”

“ Can you deny it ? ” asked Sir Hubert. “ On your oath, can you deny it ? ”

“ Most emphatically I can deny that aught injurious to your honour and her purity has ever passed between Lady Fleming and myself.”

“ Yet you have loved her.”

“ What I did in the past regards myself alone. She is your wife now, and believe me, Fleming, I am as desirous as you should be that her pure fair name should remain unsullied.”

“ You have a strange way of showing your regard for her name and mine,” retorted the sick man, with a sneer. “ And I, who thought you were to be trusted even with my heart’s treasure ! Tell me, what have you done with her ? ”

“ Fleming, you do not, cannot believe that I have aught to do with your wife’s absence. I know no more about it than you do yourself.”

“ The whole village gives you credit for knowing,” said Sir Hubert. “ I could scarcely have believed that the man I had taken to my heart as my friend could be so treacherous. Cicely false too—she who swore to be faithful to the end.” And he hid his face in his folded hands and wept like a child. Durant looked at him for some minutes in strong emotion ; then he touched his shoulder.

“ Fleming,” he said solemnly, “ by the old friendship existing between us I swear to you this story is an exaggeration (he could not, even to save Cicely, say that it was wholly false) ; I assure you I knew nothing of Lady Fleming’s projected absence. Burke told me this morning that she had gone to London, but I attached no especial importance to the information. Women are whimsical and

take sudden freaks. Doubtless she will be back before the day is out."

"Durant, do you believe what you are saying, or are you only trying to satisfy with mere words a sick and powerless man?"

"My good fellow, if you were well you would not believe any of this stuff. If I had urged Lady Fleming to flight should I remain quietly here and let her go alone? The whole thing is too preposterous. I tell you I know no more than you do where she is."

"Then some accident must have befallen her. Cicely would not go away for nothing, when I am lying here ill too. Only yesterday I was told she could not leave her bed, and to-day she has disappeared altogether."

"The person who gave you this later information was a drivelling fool," said Durant, savagely. "Lady Fleming has some good reason for what she has done, I make no doubt, and will be very vexed when she learns how disturbed you have been."

"Durant, you are only talking thus to quiet my anxiety. I can see by the working of your features that you are not so indifferent about her absence as you would have me believe. May I wholly trust you as of yore? Will you go after her and bring her back?"

"No—a thousand times no!" thundered Durant. "Evil tongues have chosen to couple my name with Lady Fleming's, and you have believed them. I am the last man on earth you should dare ask to do this thing."

"Forgive me, Durant, forgive me—if I could only go myself, I would ask no one." And Sir Hubert made an effort to rise, but fell back like a heavy weight on the couch. The excitement of the last hour had been too much for him—a second seizure had come on. Durant rang the bell violently, muttering a curse on gossip as he did so.

Again the household was convulsed, and messengers

were sent in all directions on account of this fresh indisposition of Sir Hubert's. Mrs. Bertrand, who so hated that the gloom of illness should overshadow the festivities over which she had elected to preside, had only herself to blame that the angel of sickness had been recalled.

"It is too tiresome," she confided to her husband when, a few hours later in the day, the doctor's fiat had gone forth. "Now Harry tells me he has lost the use of one side. He may be here for weeks. I am sure I wish we had never asked these Flemings at all. All our gaieties given up too!"

"I am glad Fleming was taken ill in comfortable quarters, and I am sure Harry makes a most assiduous nurse. As for gaieties, if the girls cannot do without them under the circumstances they are not worth consideration."

"Oh, you always think more of strangers than of your own family—I suppose you call it philanthropy. Where is that minx Cicely all this time, I should like to know? But if men will marry low women they must take the consequences."

The squire laughed. It was evident he knew more of the mysterious story than did his wife.

"Oh, you may jeer," she went on, irritated by his manner, "but in my opinion the world is turning upside down. To think of that wonderful Mrs. Fitzalan everybody ran after so keenly being Peter's daughter after all!"

"To think of your not recognizing her, that is what amuses me the most," answered the squire, bursting into an honest guffaw. "You, who pride yourself on your perspicacity!"

"And you," she said, turning on him angrily, "you knew her quite as well as I did; why did you not find her out?"

"The first time I saw her was at the skating rink in Paris, and I knew her instantly."

"Mr. Bertrand!" she almost shrieked, "and you never

told me! I could not believe that even you would have behaved so infamously."

"I calculated the amount of gossip and botheration my information would entail, and resolved to withhold it," he said, quietly. "Men, you see, my dear, can hold their tongues when women cannot."

"I could have been silent as well as you, if I had been made a confidante and thought worthy of a reason for caution." And she gave a little toss.

"To wit this morning," said the squire. "What object could there be in poisoning Fleming's mind against Harry, who is as good a boy as ever breathed?"

She drew herself up with dignity.

"Thank goodness, women regard virtue from a very different standard to that of a man. I don't see your nephew's goodness, and I considered it my duty to give Sir Hubert a hint that it was time he looked after his wife."

"When a man has been almost at death's door from paralysis is a very good time to choose for a little unpleasant intelligence—unfounded intelligence, I should say, too—for I do not believe a word of it," was the pointed remark.

Mrs. Bertrand began to whimper.

"Oh, if my husband is going to turn against me it is time I gave up trying to do my best in life."

"Stuff and nonsense—don't be silly—give up crying, for mercy's sake; only, if your 'best' means interfering with other people's business, do your worst—that is all I have to say."

Mrs. Bertrand dried her tears with the corner of her lace handkerchief.

"You are very severe," she said emphatically, "very severe. The only question I would ask by way of retort is—where is Cicely?"

"What the deuce business is it of yours or mine? All I can say is, not with Harry, since he is here."

"No business of ours, Mr. Bertrand? Then we are to invite waifs and strays like this Lady Fleming into the house, allow them to be as inconsequent and vagrant in their conduct as they choose, and hold ourselves in no way responsible for their actions? A pretty father of a family you make! Let me tell you if this Cicely does return I shall lock the dear girls up safely in a room and allow them to hold no communication with her of any sort whatever."

"Then all I can say is you will make yourself supremely ridiculous," was the quiet answer. "If the girls have not had sufficiently high principles instilled into them to keep straight without being locked up, the key and bolt dodge won't do much good, I fancy."

"'Evil communications corrupt good manners,' the Bible says," replied Mrs. Bertrand, conclusively. "We shall be having the girls walking off next, and thinking it the right thing to do, if we make too light of the matter."

"If May had the pluck of a hen partridge she would have been off with young Duncombe long ago."

"Mr. Bertrand, are you a father and dare assert such a thing with calmness?"

"Her mother has not shown her much kindly feeling," he answered. "I like Algy Duncombe, and should be very well pleased to see May his wife. They are fond of each other, and I don't know why you should try to separate them. It is in the order of nature that people should marry. I doubt if we should have been very amenable to reason if fathers and mothers had interfered with us."

"We could manage to keep a comfortable home over our heads; but Mr. Duncombe has no money."

"Did we think about money when we were young? Besides, I'll give May a good allowance. It is a mistake for youngsters to begin on too much. Think of your youth, Bertha, and don't be hard on the girls."

Thus appealed to, Mrs. Bertrand simpered and tried to get up a touch of sentiment. But was it all love she had felt for the squire in the old days? Nay, she could not remember the time when the broad acres around Swinton Hall had not filled a prominent place in the picture she had mentally drawn of her future life with him.

Mrs. Bertrand, even in the earliest stage of her development, was of too ungenial a nature to allow feeling to interfere if gold and position lay across its path; or perchance a certain penniless young cornet might have stood a higher chance of winning her affection than the rich landowner. Of this, however, the squire knew nothing; he had accepted her assurances of devotion readily and credited them for far more than they were worth.

It was the first time he had broached the subject of the flirtation between Algy and May to his wife, though on more than one occasion he had talked it over with Harry Durant. In this, too, perhaps, he showed the usual amount of that quiet, unobtrusive wisdom for which his familiars held him renowned. No fresh suitors had declared themselves for May, who studiously avoided receiving any attention when Algy was not by. This somewhat irritated Mrs. Bertrand, and made her almost ready to agree that "even Algy would be better than no one." It was against her creed to have both her daughters so long unmarried. Thus she listened more attentively to her husband's suggestions than she would have done some months ago, and was considering whether it might not perhaps be as well to discover what fortune Algy really had—for she knew naught of Mr. Durant's interview with his father—when a sudden and fresh "sensation" interrupted the conversation and produced a different chain of ideas.

"A telegram for Mr. Durant."

"Where is Harry—in Fleming's sick room? Let him be sent for. No more excitements up there, for goodness'

sake." And the squire held the missive in his hand while the servant who had brought it went to summon his nephew.

What would not Durant have given to be alone when he opened it; but it was but another ordeal he had to pass through as part-punishment for disloyal thoughts.

"Lady Fleming to H. Durant." How his hand trembled as he held the pink paper message and his mouth twitched beneath the thick moustache!

"Feeling ill, I came home. Tell Sir Hubert, and bring him as soon as you can. Send Judkins."

The clouds cleared from Durant's brow as he read, and he passed the message to his aunt.

"As I presumed," he said, quietly, "Fleming has been made ill for nothing."

"How very odd! Whatever did she go away for?" And Mrs. Bertrand looked up at her husband, who was reading over her shoulder.

"Because she was not comfortable under your roof, I should say, my dear," he said, smiling.

"Why, she was staying at Mr. Burke's!"

"Just so; but she could not stop there for ever."

Mr. Durant took the paper and walked out of the room without farther words. So far it was well, and good tidings for Sir Hubert; yet he himself was not thoroughly satisfied as to whether the message was a *bonâ fide* one, or only an invention of Algy's to throw dust in the eyes of those who sought to see too much.

Till the morning's post should arrive he could not feel wholly peaceful about Cicely. And yet "Send Judkins" evidently meant that there was nothing to conceal from the abigail's watchful investigation.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ALWAYS ALGY.

CICELY sprang from the sofa as Algy entered the room and stood before him with downcast eyes, round which the black circles still held conspicuous place. She seemed ashamed to look up, and trembled from head to foot.

"My sweet sister," he said, taking her by the hand, and thus claiming as a right the authority which he intended to enforce, "my sweet sister, your absence from Swinton has occasioned much anxiety."

"To whom?" she asked, still gazing at the pattern on the carpet.

"To all your friends," he answered readily.

"Ah, already! Then the story has not been long in travelling."

"What story, Lady Fleming? I have heard none," he said, perceiving that he had made a slight mistake in telling her she had been so generally missed.

She did not reply; only covered her face with her hands and turned away.

Of Mrs. Fitzalan's presence he had as yet taken no notice; but she addressed him—

"Has Sir Hubert sent you to look after his wife? It seems to me he trusts her to strange guardians—first Durant and then yourself."

"The most treacherous chaperon to whom Lady Fleming was ever confided was to Margaret Denham. If you had fulfilled your trust to-day's interference on my part would be unnecessary." And Algy spoke sharply and looked fiercely.

"I am not responsible to you for my actions," she said, coldly, "nor do I intend to resign Lady Fleming into your

care without written authority from Sir Hubert. We have had philandering enough with lovers lately. How do I know what your intentions may be?"

"You mean to keep her on in this hotel till the whole town is alive with the scandal her absence will create. Your devilish scheme includes the ruin of her good name and the blasting of Durant's reputation as a man of honour, I believe. Oh, I know your game, Mrs. Fitzalan—adventuress that you are."

And, bubbling over with unsuppressed fury, Algy glared at her angrily.

"Algy, be reasonable—do," pleaded Cicely. "I have gone through so many exciting scenes of late, I can bear no more. Only let me go away somewhere alone and be at peace."

"My dearest Lady Fleming, no fitter place for you to rest in than your own house at Campden Hill."

She shook her head.

"I have forfeited the right to be quiet and happy there."

"Nonsense. This is mere morbidness, which a good night's rest will dispel. Let me, as your friend and brother, escort you at once to Campden Hill, and beg and entreat of you to give no ear to the vile thoughts this so-called Mrs. Fitzalan would suggest for you to dwell on."

"Being so ready in your plans for Lady Fleming, Mr. Duncombe, pray have you none to make for me? Whither do you suggest that I should betake myself?"

"To the devil, where you came from!" he answered impetuously. But again Cicely stopped him.

"She has been good to me—if it had not been for her you would not have found me here now."

"Why, where were you going?"

"To drown myself, I think. Oh, Algy, tell me what to do. You promised to be a brother to me—help me now."

He took both her hands and gently seated her on the sofa, placing himself beside her.

"Cicely, do you know how much happiness you are wrecking by this inconsequent behaviour of yours? If you gave the matter five minutes' healthy consideration—brought your reason to bear on it, instead of allowing feeling only to have its sway—you would not act as you are doing."

"Bravo, Mr. Duncombe—when all other trades fail you can turn preacher," jeered Mrs. Fitzalan; but he paid no attention, and went on as though she had not spoken.

"Fleming is very ill, as you are aware, and is in total ignorance of your flight. When he asks for you he will be told you are at Campden Hill. Go there, then, at once, or return with me to Swinton, whichever you prefer."

"I cannot go back." And she shivered.

"The latter I will not urge, but I do implore you to go to your own house at once—for your sake—for your husband's—and for Durant's."

"What difference can it make to Mr. Durant whether I go back or not?"

"The difference between a life of self-recrimination and miserable upbraiding, and one of content and happiness," said Algy, fervently.

"Since when has Harry Durant grown so conscientiously scrupulous about women's feelings?" asked Mrs. Fitzalan, once more interrupting the conversation.

"Since he learned to appreciate and value a woman whose characteristics are purity and virtue," was the answer.

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed.

"Strange he should look for those rare and estimable qualities in another man's wife!"

Algy started up, as though he could brook no more of Mrs. Fitzalan's vengeful quips.

"Lady Fleming, will you kindly put on your hat and

let us go? I have already shown you the high stake—even the happiness of three people—that is in jeopardy if you refuse to return to your home.”

But Cicely still lingered.

“I do not care for myself,” she murmured. “I shall be better away; and Sir Hubert does not want me—at least he will not, when he knows, as he must know soon.”

“And Durant counts for nothing in the scale—Durant, for whom you profess to care—yet whose worldly prospects, whose happiness, whose belief in himself you entirely annihilate by this whimsical womanish caprice of yours!” cried Algy, growing almost eloquent as he perceived that to work upon Cicely he must make free use of the supposed injury her obstinate persistence in staying away from home would do Durant.

“If you have no regard either for yourself or Fleming,” he went on, “at least think of a man whose only sin has been a rash love for you, for which love you would make him pay the severe penalty of forfeiting his honourable name, as he assuredly must do, if——”

“I will go with you at once,” interrupted Cicely. “You are right. Ah, how thankful I am that I have found a kind, loving brother!”

He pressed her hand for answer.

Mrs. Fitzalan now rose and began busying herself with preparations for departure. Algy watched her for a few seconds.

“You are about to return to Paris, I presume?” he said at last.

“Later. My present intention is to accompany Lady Fleming.”

“Not if I know it,” was the blunt retort.

“May I ask how you intend to prevent me?”

“Simply by having you taken up for felony, if you do not march yourself out of the country by the quickest route.”

"Felony! Mr. Duncombe, pray do not be ridiculous and melodramatic."

Be it remembered Algy had not learnt the details of Mrs. Fitzalan's past delinquencies. The shot he had just fired was thus somewhat of a random one. It had not failed, however, in making its mark, for he saw her wince, notwithstanding her careless words; so he thought he would try another.

"No, I dare say melodrama would not amuse you, especially if Durant and Miss Wilson are brought actively into the play."

"You have been my evil genius from the first hour I saw you. By what right do you peer into the dark mysteries of my life?" she asked.

"By the right which every John Bull thinks he has to insist on fair play," he answered, laughing. "If you keep quiet I shall not interfere; but if you insist on meddling with Lady Fleming we shall have a tussle to see which is the stronger. I do not wish to disparage you to her. Only bid her good-bye, and I'll say no more."

"I know everything," said Cicely, quietly: "more than my poor head feels as if it could thoroughly understand."

"My dear Lady Fleming, do come. You are not fit for these disputes. Shall I send for Deb to be with you?"

"Yes, if you will. Good-bye, Mrs. Fitzalan. Don't think me unkind, but I would rather not have you at Campden Hill, please. I hope you will not find your affairs in Paris quite so desperate as you have reason to fear. For all the kindness you have ever shown me I thank you from my heart; for the rest I forgive you most sincerely."

"Pray do come, Lady Fleming!" Algy was growing irritable under the infliction of what he deemed maudlin sentimentality lavished on a worthless adventuress.

Cicely followed him into the passage. He turned and put his head once more into the room—

"The tidal train leaves for Paris at eight P.M."

He slammed the door and strode down the stairs.

"She is ruined," whispered Cicely; "some man in Paris has made off with all her money, and she has not a *sou* in the world."

"By Jove! and we have left her to pay the bill! Gramercy! but I don't like that. She is a woman after all."

So, with something like a bathos, the scene ended—as most scenes do in life—for Algy ran upstairs again; and giving Mrs. Fitzalan a "fiver," with Lady Fleming's compliments, to pay expenses, was gone before she could speak or assure him, as she most certainly would have done, that, whatever might be her position in the future, at that moment she was perfectly capable of paying her way. She looked out of the window, however, and saw them drive off as she pocketed the note. Natural instincts were too strong upon her to allow her wantonly to throw away a substance for the mere shadow of a pride which after all did not really exist, and for which, with such antecedents as hers had been, it would be vain to look. She was not going to sit any longer in that dismal room now Cicely had gone; so she paid the bill and went out into the street. "Her game of life had been a losing hazard," she thought to herself as she wandered on and wondered in what direction she should next turn her mind. "No money and a crooked reputation was not first-rate capital wherewith to begin the world afresh, but she dared say it was as good as any other. It did not seem to her that moralists and millionaires got on a bit better than other people. There was always something to fight against—some skeleton to conceal. Precious bad teaching, no doubt, the good folks would say; but for her part she did not profess to be good, nor to understand subtle arguments about right and wrong. She had been thwarted, hardened, and disgusted in early youth, and she was sure she had done no particular harm then. If she had stayed at Swinton, opened the

lodge gate, and curtseyed to the ladies at the Hall, no doubt every one would have said she was a paragon of virtue. Faugh! she would rather be standing friendless and moneyless as she was at that moment than have lived and died the meek heroine of an idyll."

So strong was the adventuress' spirit still in Mrs. Fitzalan, and thus did her thoughts transgress the bounds prescribed by morality as she sauntered through the London streets, on which drizzling rain had begun to fall, and waited impatiently for the time when the Paris train should start.

"M. Barbier—what a fool she had been to trust him! But that, she supposed, was another *mauvais tour* from fate, for without him in the first instance she could not have possessed herself either of the fortune or the name of Fitzalan. After all, she had had a fling, and she was no worse off than she had been on the day when she met Stephen Fitzalan in the streets of New York, nearly twenty years ago."

The facts, as she had received information from Paris were, that M. Barbier, having learnt from herself that the feloniously acquired money which for so many years now he had shared with her as an accomplice was in jeopardy of passing into the hands of the rightful owner, had prudently resolved to feather his own nest; consequently he had taken advantage of her temporary absence in England to realize all the securities, and had gone off, leaving Mrs. Fitzalan nothing but the furniture in her apartment in the Champs Elysées, the money obtained by the sale of which would do little more, she knew, than liquidate her debts. She had received this news just as she was on the point of starting to have an interview with Miss Wilson; hence the reason that the old servant, who had lived ever since Algy's visit in mortal dread of seeing Mrs. Fitzalan, went on enduring her monotonous life in the second floor in Clare Street, without any exciting episode with her former friend.

Now the money was gone, Miss Wilson's existence troubled the quondam Mrs. Fitzalan very little, except that the thought of her evoked an angry exclamation when it arose, for, by the arrangements made at the time, Miss Wilson had had sufficient hush-money paid down to provide her with an annuity, and was consequently at this moment in clover, while the reputed widow herself had nothing but penury staring her in the face.

"Six o'clock at last. Just time to get some dinner and make a final start."

There is a large, gaudily decorated restaurant close by—this will suit Mrs. Fitzalan's future habits better than a respectable, sombre private room in an hotel.

She turns in—the first time for years that she has gone unattended to such a place, but Bohemian instincts, never wholly dead within her, revive with present circumstances.

She feels by no means shy, and orders her dinner *en connaisseur*. Then she looks round. The faces are unfamiliar—most of them coarse and hard and deeply lined by the wear and tear of life, for it is no fashionable resort into which she has betaken herself, but one where the real workers and strugglers along the world's highway seek to forget for a while their homelessness and friendlessness. The glittering gaslights and noisy clatter of this cheap restaurant is to them more precious than the well-appointed, heavily-furnished dining-room is to the rich householder, even though the viands provided are an example of the worst form of French cookery, and the wine alcoholic in the very highest degree. Still within these walls the toilers find one hour of warmth and mental expansion, while the trammels of drudgery are forgotten, and the dark face-lines grow less furrowed, the heavy eyes less blear. But Mrs. Fitzalan could not help remarking how different this place was to those of a similar description in Paris, where every one eats and chatters by turns—"these

Londoners never seem to speak to those they do not know, and only in whispered tones to those they do."

For some time she had a little table entirely to herself; then a man came and sat opposite to her. Whenever she looked up his eyes were on her. She ransacked her memory to discover where she had seen him before; at last curiosity got the better of discretion and she resolved to address him.

"*Monsieur est français?*" she asked, softly, for something in his accent and manner made her decide that he was not an Englishman.

"*C'est vous, madame*—I could scarcely believe my senses—here!"

Still Mrs. Fitzalan was nonplussed, and by no means pleased at being recognised.

"*Je ne vous connais pas,*" she said, shortly.

"*Cependant*—we suffer together."

"*Comment* together?"

"I was the clerk to M. Barbier. It was I who wrote to you of his flight."

"*Tiens*, and what are you doing in London?"

"I am not likely to place myself in Paris; and with a knowledge of English picked up in America with M. Barbier, I have come to London."

"You will not do any good here unless you have friends."

"Will madame help me?"

"I am returning to Paris by this next train."

"Then I must find the *héritière* and make terms with her for information about M. Barbier."

"*Mon Dieu*, how black the world is!" cried Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing. "How few there are among us who would not sell our souls for gold! You are right, M. Barbier is a scoundrel. I would rather Lady Fleming had the money than he. Denounce him; I will help you—I parted from her not three hours ago."

"*Madame a raison*. It is well to make a virtue of

necessity," said the *commis*, blandly. "I have already been to the house of this Lady Fleming; but the husband is dying."

"Pooh, nonsense—not dying." But Mrs. Fitzalan looked as if the information startled her. "Not dying—only ill."

"Madame may be better informed—the *maître d'hôtel* is my authority."

Mrs. Fitzalan was silent for a few seconds.

Dying—Sir Hubert! Was all her planning and plotting for naught? Sir Hubert dead, would not Cicely become Harry Durant's wife, and the wreck of this fortune—if ever it were recovered—go to him? No, she would interfere no more—the inscrutable workings of fate should settle it.

She pushed her chair back from the table with a jerk.

"Monsieur, I am sorry I can do nothing to help you, but the time is up—the train starts in twenty minutes. Write to me in Paris. I am much interested, though I have no time for conversation."

"Shall I accompany madame to the station?"

"Do, and then you can give me particulars."

But Mrs. Fitzalan heeded but little the account of M. Barbier's delinquencies—the thought that perchance she was about to be foiled in her scheme of vengeance by Sir Hubert's death was the one idea paramount in her mind, not only during her walk with the *commis*, but through all the hours of rapid travelling towards the great French capital.

CHAPTER XL.

A COUP DE THÉÂTRE.

THE drawing-room in the villa at Campden Hill, with its steps leading down into the pretty garden; though the gay flower-beds which Cicely had helped to lay out in the early spring are now tinted with an autumnal hue, yet the sun is shining brightly on the scene, and reflecting its warmth and gladness on hearts as well as mere external objects. Lady Fleming, wan and pale, is lying on a small couch by the open window; Deb, with her large beautiful eyes fixed on her face, is seated at her feet. For the last few days Deb has been an inmate of the villa, Algy having constituted her head nurse; and she fills the function with an amount of importance which is absolutely amusing—lording it over Judkins in the matter of prescriptions and remedies till that equally important abigail feels so aggrieved as to threaten to give up her situation. Cicely is too dejected to trouble about their little quarrels on her behalf—she has relapsed into a somewhat similar state to that in which she lay at the vicarage—to be left quiet is all she asks. They have not told her of Sir Hubert's fresh indisposition; in fact, from Algy only, who comes to see her daily, does she learn aught of the inmates of Swinton Hall.

"I wonder why Mr. Duncombe has not been here to-day?" she is saying to Deb as they sit together watching the sunshine, for Algy's visits have become the one event to which Cicely daily looks forward in her monotonous life.

"He was mysterious when he went away, and said he should be late," was Deb's unguarded answer.

"He is not going to bring any one with him, do you

think ? ” And Cicely started up and the colour rose to her cheeks.

“ Not that I know of,” answered Deb. “ But, my goodness, Lady Fleming, how excited you do get ! Whoever could he bring ? ”

“ Sir Hubert. I do not want Sir Hubert to come—at all events not yet.”

“ Law ! if I had a sick husband like Sir Hubert I would nurse him, that I would. I wonder why you don’t ? But I suppose in your class of life it ain’t genteel to do kind and homely things yourself.” Which remark of Deb’s explains that loyal Algy had revealed nothing to her of the real state of affairs—merely told her that Lady Fleming was ill and required companionship and tending.

“ Sir Hubert would not care to have me for a nurse,” was Cicely’s answer, in a sad tone.

“ Wouldn’t he ? That is especially queer. My observations would have told me that if a man liked you well enough to take you for a wife he’d like you well enough for a nurse. But you great folk are all upside down somehow.”

“ Then you would not care to marry a gentleman, I suppose, Deb ? ”

“ I don’t want to marry no one,” answered the girl, shortly. “ Them as I like wouldn’t like me, and them as liked me I should not like, maybe. That’s the way of the world ; so it’s best to leave it all alone.”

“ You are right, Deb ; I wish I had your sense and courage.”

Deb’s large eyes filled with tears—she thought she understood the situation ; and what girl, even though she be gutter-born, has not a sympathizing chord awakened in her heart at the cry of a hopeless and forlorn passion—for Mr. Durant, too—who to Deb was a *beau idéal*, the very prince and king of men ?

“ Don’t praise me before praise is due,” she said after

a moment. "I have not been put to the test yet; when I am perhaps I shall not prove stronger than other folk."

"Ah," murmured Cicely, turning away her head from the girl's eyes, which seemed to fascinate her; "if one only need not try to resist, but could just let things drift! After all, it is not much use trying, for nothing ever happens as one arranges."

"That's ups and downs," said Deb. "Don't believe in the downs, and don't trust the ups, that's Miss Gretchen's advice."

"Foolish nonsense," answered Cicely, excitedly. "Miss Gretchen is a goody. What do goodies know about temptation? If they did they would not preach. I don't believe one of the whole army of them knows what it is to say No and break her heart in saying it—if she did she would be silent and die."

"That's it, my lady. People never talk about what they feel; they do it, and there's an end."

"Yes, there is an end, Deb, and a very miserable end sometimes. I don't know which is the worst to endure, the virtuous end or the wicked one."

"Lor, them's morals for a lady!"

"You are right, Deb; I should not talk wild talk to you—you cannot understand. If only Algy would come! Sing something, child—it helps to pass the time."

Deb tried to do her bidding, but her voice was husky. She could scarcely repress her tears at the thought that she could not be wholly Cicely's confidante, and was jealous of Algy, who could cheer and soothe where her less cultivated knowledge failed. She overcame the passing emotion, though, with that strength of will which was the strong point in her character, and warbled away one ditty after another, casting off all her reserve, and singing heart and soul with the careless merriment of the old crossing days—before, as she would herself have expressed it,

"gentility had come to shut out all the frolic." Now Lady Fleming was to be amused ; so she let herself go, and sang and danced and talked nonsense by turns, till Cicely could not help entering more or less into the spirit of the girl's humour, and chatted more gaily than she had done since she left London for Swinton Hall. A ring at the front door bell suddenly stopped them in the midst of their unusual mirth.

"Algy ! I wonder what news he will bring to-day ?" cried Lady Fleming, a sort of cold cloud passing over her as the sound of the bell brought back on a sudden the full recollection of all her misery.

"Cis, my dearest Cis—so you are seedy and bored and alone ?" And Cicely found herself in Lady Susan's arms, heartily kissed and warmly greeted ; while poor Deb skulked away into a corner, then down the steps into the garden.

"She was nobody," she opined ; "might go away again now faster than she came, since Sir Hubert's fine cousin had come to look after my lady."

True, for a time she was forgotten ; but neither Lady Susan nor Cicely were likely to depreciate Deb's faithfulness and send her into the cold for aye.

"So you made a mess of the whole thing down at Swinton—I had a presentiment that you would. I can't think what you went there for."

"Oh, Lady Sue, how do you know ? Has the story already travelled everywhere ?"

"Thanks to Algy Duncombe, who is a sharp boy, it is to be hoped there will be no story to travel. He telegraphed in your name to Swinton, saying you were here, and at the same time wired me a message that you were ill. Of course I came to look after you as soon as I could. He met me at the station, and here I am."

"I wonder what he told you ?" murmured Cicely.

"Not more than I knew before, you silly little goose.

I warned Durant to keep out of the way long ago ; but men are such fools they never will do as they are told."

"He could not help it ; it was fate."

"Oh, of course you take his part—women always do. But you humbugged me, you horrid little actress. You were so bright I thought you had not a care in life."

"I was not acting ; I was trying to make myself believe I did not care."

"No more you do," said Lady Sue, decisively. "You care about a talk and a public scandal and a botheration, and yet in the most inconsequent way you are doing all you can to bring them all three about."

"Oh, Lady Sue, I only want to be left quite alone and be at peace."

"You want what you won't get in this world, then ; so don't be irrational. If I were one of the canting lot I should talk to you about your duty to my poor cousin, the terrible sin of your deviation from the path of virtue, etc., etc. ; but I am a woman of the world, and all that is not in my line. Still I do beg of you to make use of your common sense, and don't put your head into a noose that is sure to hang you in the end."

"Oh, it is all so dreadful, and I don't know what to do," sighed Cicely, half crying. "No one was ever so wretched before. I should like to do what is right, but circumstances seem so thoroughly against me."

"Look here, Cis : do you think I am a very miserable woman ?"

"Certainly not. You are the happiest and most light-hearted of my acquaintance," answered Lady Fleming.

"And you would be surprised to hear that I had gone through the same sort of ordeal that you are passing now."

"You, Lady Sue !"

"Yes, I, Lady Sue, have had my little love episodes in the past. I am not so very old now, but I have outlived them. I am a fashionable wife, so the world says, but it

can't say worse, because I don't give it the chance. Only no one supposes that I am over head and ears in love with Mr. Verulam—no woman could be; but he is good to me, and in return I am civil to him; in fact, I do the very least a woman can do for her husband—I respect his name."

Cicely winced; but she asked quietly, "Why did you marry him?"

"To please my father, or rather to help him out of difficulties. It was the old story, my family and Mr. Verulam's money-bags were balanced to prop us both up."

"Did you love some one else?" was Cicely's next question.

"Yes, a denizen of that borderland yclept Bohemia. I have a taste that way still; but I have never seen my hero but once since I consented to bear the name of Verulam. Then our meeting was a stormy one—passion and tears, all that sort of thing, and I resolved it should be the last."

"Did not he think you cold and heartless?"

"*Ca va sans dire*; but I explained it all to him very fully; and I have no doubt he thanks me now, for he married a citizen's daughter with a lot of money."

"This is reason, not love," said Cicely. "It bears no analogy to the case in point. I could never have done such a thing."

"My dear girl, where is the difference? You loved Durant when you married Hubert."

"Yes; but I did not know he loved me."

"A pity you ever found it out; and, having found it out, the sooner you forget it the better."

"Oh, Lady Sue, I can't forget—I know I am very wicked. I don't want to see Mr. Durant any more; only I would rather not see Sir Hubert either. Could I not go into some nunnery, right away from every one?"

"Could you not make yourself exceedingly silly and ridiculous, I suppose you mean? Just buckle on your

armour, child, and get up from that sofa and resolve to be brave and honest, and you'll succeed—that is, if you intend to be successful.”

“I have tried all along, and I have failed miserably. That is what makes me so wretched. If Mrs. Fitzalan had not said those dreadful things to me I should have done very well; but to think that everybody should know I am wicked! I can't stand that and face people—I came here to please Algy Duncombe, and now I am here I wish I was away.”

“Well, you are an impracticable young person! Neither precept nor example seems to have much effect on you. I have adduced both during the last half-hour; but I don't mean to let you slip through my fingers—I shall make a model wife of you in the end. You have not asked me to take off my bonnet, but I mean to stay. I suppose you will give me some dinner. I have invited Algy—he went home to his quarters to see if there was any news from Swinton.”

“Dinner—of course—order what you like, Lady Sue. About Swinton—do you think Sir Hubert will come up soon?”

Lady Susan looked grave as she answered—

“I do not know. But there is Algy's ring; perhaps he has heard.”

Mr. Duncombe came into the room, looking bright, as he always did. It would have been difficult to eclipse the sunshine in Algy's character, whatever befell.

“What success?” he asked, *sotto voce*, of Lady Sue, when Cicely, after a few minutes' conversation, went on to the steps to call Deb—forgotten during her recent talk.

“Nothing but a *coup de théâtre* will save her,” was the whispered answer.

“By Jove, then, she shall have it with a vengeance.”

Lady Susan looked askance, but there was no time for more. Lady Fleming and Deb came into the room

together, and Algy could not help thinking of the time when he had repudiated the thought of these two women being selected as intimates for Sir Hubert Fleming's wife, yet how in the hour of difficulty they had proved to be staunch and devoted friends.

The evening passed pleasantly; no allusions were made to disagreeable subjects. Algy, who had some knowledge of music, played accompaniments while Deb sang; and the girl, who had felt sadly out of place among "this grand company," was once more in her element when carried into the land of song.

What Algy's projects were as regarded Cicely, Lady Sue could not divine, for on the subject of news from Swinton he was very reticent, always turning the conversation whenever it touched on the doings of any of the inmates of the Hall.

It was growing late, and Lady Susan's carriage was announced.

"Can I drive you back to town, Mr. Duncombe, without shocking the proprieties?"

"I had hoped you would have remained here to-night," he said, sobering in features and tone from his late buoyant manner. "I have put it off as long as I can, but before I leave I am compelled to tell Lady Fleming some painful news."

Cicely grew ashy pale.

"Sir Hubert!—oh, tell me—he is not——"

"No, Cicely, but he is very, very ill—so ill that he will never recover."

She hid her face away from them among the sofa cushions and lay there very still, but she did not weep.

"Has he had a relapse?" asked Lady Sue.

"Another stroke, brought on by hearing of Cicely's flight."

"Oh, Mr. Duncombe!" cried Lady Susan, deprecatingly, as though she thought he was administering too

strong a remedy; but he held up his hand to silence her.

"It is the truth, the miserable truth, and it must be told."

Cicely raised herself painfully; her features were set—her tearless face looked stony.

"Take me to him," she said. "Whatever they all think of me, I must go to him now."

"He is to be brought home on an invalid bed to-morrow."

"Here? Thank God, thank God!" And she fell back once more among the cushions.

"Lady Susan would stay all night, of course—he must go and tell Mr. Verulam that Cicely was too ill to be left. How would the drama end?—for a life drama it assuredly was. Would Sir Hubert die? And if so——"

But Algy only shrugged his shoulders in response to this unspoken query.

"She does not know the worst—Fleming suspects the truth. It is only a woman of your tact and worldly acumen who can guide this business to a happy issue."

"Good gracious, what a responsibility! And Cicely is so very restive and impossible to manage."

"She will be more amenable now. Reason goes for nothing with Lady Fleming; it is only through her feelings you can touch her."

"Just so; and as sentiment and romance never were in my line, it is very difficult to know how to deal with them."

But, onerous though the task was, Lady Susan did not flinch from it; and as Algy shook hands and bade her good night in the hall, where these last few words had been said, he felt he could not have left Cicely with better surroundings—"though the hash some people do contrive to make of their lives, and all for nothing too, is perfectly incredible," he soliloquised to himself as he rolled back to town in Lady Susan's comfortable brougham.

CHAPTER XLI.

CICELY'S VERDICT.

ONCE more Cicely and Harry Durant stand on either side of Sir Hubert Fleming's couch. Is this to be the final interview for which Cicely had asked, or is the spirit of him they are watching about to pass away for ever, leaving them free to pursue their inclinations as they will? The journey to town had been almost too much for Sir Hubert; but he had pleaded so hard to be taken home that the doctor had judged it wiser to concede; and Durant, as a devoted friend, had accompanied him to his own house, determining as he did so never to cross its threshold again after that day. But the spark of life seemed nearly extinct, it was so feeble in Sir Hubert's exhausted frame. They gave him brandy, raised his head with pillows, and watched him for a long while. At last he opened his dimmed eyes and looked at Cicely.

"My wife," he murmured, "my poor young wife!"

She burst out crying.

"Don't pity me, Sir Hubert; you have more cause for wrath than pity."

"Pray do not excite him, Lady Fleming—be careful," said Durant, hurriedly.

"Leave me," she answered, "leave me alone with my husband. How dare you come between him and me?"

Harry Durant started, and his brow grew crimson at this sudden change in her tone and manner.

She noted his surprised and grieved expression, and the tenderness came back into her voice as she continued—

"Only for a few minutes, till I have made my confession and received forgiveness; then I have that to say to you

to which we will have no witnesses. You will trust us, dear Sir Hubert, will you not?"

He bowed his head, but did not speak.

She led Durant to the door.

"Promise not to leave this house till I have seen you again."

"You are never going to be so rash as to talk to Fleming? I have told him all it is necessary that he should know."

"I will act a lie no longer."

"But, Cicely, the consequences—in his precarious state!"

"If he died without forgiving me I could never survive it. I must act for myself now—nay, I will."

She closed the door and went back once more to Sir Hubert. On her knees beside his sofa she told him all her tale—magnifying her faults—doubling each unfaithful thought. He did not speak till she had finished; then he muttered, indistinctly—

"Poor child—poor Cicely—and I had hoped to shield and help you."

"But you will forgive me, dear? Neither by word nor deed will I ever stray again. This time I will keep my promise to be faithful."

"It will not be for long, Cicely, child; and when I am gone Durant will prove worthier and kinder. As his wife——"

"Never, Hubert, never. However long or short a time it may please God to spare your life, I will never marry Mr. Durant."

"Ah, child, don't say so. While I have lain ill it has been a consolation to think he would care for you and look after you."

"You will live yet many years, I hope, dear Hubert; but, if not, so help me God, I will never be Harry Durant's wife!"

"Wherefore? You have loved him, you say."

"For that very reason, because I have guiltily loved him, I will keep my vow. Oh, Hubert, live; live for my sake, and let us be happy and forget all this miserable past."

The sick man smiled wanly.

"That rests with a higher Power, my darling. If I am spared I shall be a perpetual burden to you; I can never walk again save as a cripple."

"I will be your crutch; you shall lean on me—now—always—only say you forgive me."

"I have little to forgive, love. I was a foolish old man to imagine a young beauty like you could love me." And he stroked her head and kissed the eyelids, swollen and red with weeping.

It was peace in that hushed chamber—such peace as had not been witnessed there since Cicely's coming home as a bride. The minutes had grown into an hour—then two hours—and still she lingered there. Had she forgotten that other interview she had demanded of Durant? Perhaps she dreaded it—felt that the strength which seemed to have come to her on a sudden, as though supernaturally, might fail under the glance of those loved eyes. Whatever the reason, she hovered about her husband's couch as though safety alone existed in the atmosphere she then breathed.

But the day was waning, and as darkness came she summoned up courage and took a resolution.

"Mr. Durant," she said calmly—"I must go to him."

"Do not be harsh on my old friend, Cicely. He could not help loving you."

Harsh to Harry Durant! How could such an idea ever have entered her head? Better than her life she loved him still; yet she must part from him for ever—so long as they both should live they must meet no more. Whatever befell, in a lifetime of self-sacrifice Cicely must expiate her past transgressions. This was the verdict she had passed

on herself as she saw Sir Hubert carried powerless into the house and remembered Algy Duncombe's words, that this fresh illness was produced "by hearing of her flight."

She crept down the staircase slowly and noiselessly, meeting no one as she went, and passed into Sir Hubert's study. It was veiled in grey shadow, still light enough to render objects discernible, but yet everything seemed drear and sombre and indistinct. She stood there for a few seconds very still and passive. Was she striving to steady her nerves, control her emotions, so that she might look and act the part she did not feel?

"For the last time!"—a *triste* thought when in connection with the most trivial, least pleasant relations of life; how far more saddening and bewildering when it carries with it knowledge that "for the last time" all that is dearest and best loved on earth may be greeted and gazed on!

"For the last time!" How could she say all she had to tell without betraying herself—how case herself in steel so as to appear cold and determined without being harsh? Yet it must be done. Existence in future would have its void—there would be nothing to look forward to—nothing to believe in—no one to support her under difficulties. Only one thought must fill her life—to nurse Sir Hubert lovingly—be his prop and stay, and seek to stamp out every trace of individual feeling. Yes, Algy, with the dexterous hand of a clever operator, had cut keenly into the very core of the disease when he blamed Cicely for Sir Hubert's state, since she herself of her own free will was about to cast off the shackles which had bound her to a forbidden love, and was determined that, cost what it might, she would bid Durant go hence for ever and let her be free. But she still stands pondering in the semi-darkness—where is Durant? Yes, it will be over soon now, and then——

She passes her hand across her brow, as though to

clear away the mists which hang about her brain, and at last opens the door. The servants have been convulsed in the midst of their ordinary duties by the illness of their master—there is still no light in the hall. When she reaches the drawing-room once more Cicely pauses—she hears a low wailing monotone going on within—can Harry Durant be there? She turns the handle with a jerk, and, summoning all her courage, walks rapidly forward. Some one rises out of the darkness in the farthest corner, with a little cry.

“Deb!—here alone! Where is Mr. Durant?”

“Gone!”

The agony of tone in which Cicely echoed the word told its own tale of disappointed hope.

“Yes, he went nearly an hour ago, back to town with Lady Susan.”

Cicely did not speak again, but stood clutching a chair for support, looking so white and still as the pale twilight showed her features that Deb felt awed and trembled as though a spirit were there. There was a breathless silence till Cicely said, softly, “It is all over, then, and we shall meet no more.

The sound of her words seemed to break the spell, and Deb burst out, impetuously—

“He walked about here like a madman—vowed all sorts of strange things—wished you well with one breath, and said you had deceived him with another. Then he flung himself on that sofa and sobbed. Great Heaven, I hope never to hear or see the like again. If it had been me he had loved——”

“Hush, for the love of mercy hush. My God, can it be possible that I am going mad!” And Cicely stood there, her hands pressed upon her temples, as though striving to retain her senses, which Deb’s rash words had almost driven away for ever. “To be mad or die,” she said, after a few seconds, “which were happier?” Then she gave a

sort of hysterical laugh, which frightened Deb, who threw her arms round her and begged her to be calm.

"I am very quiet and still," said Cicely, still laughing spasmodically. "Why should I be otherwise? Come and sit down and tell me what has happened. Mr. Durant has gone, you say. It is well. I am a wife, you know, and cannot listen to the mad folly of every man who chooses to profess his love for me."

The words came out with an utterance so rapid as to be almost indistinct; and this sudden transition from icy coldness to feverish heat alarmed Deb more and more. She could not call any one to help her, for there was no one in the house save servants and the sick husband, so she forced Lady Fleming on to the sofa, and sitting beside her tried to untalk all the mischief her unguarded words had occasioned, but Cicely did not seem to heed her, and Deb chattered on. At last she started up, and seizing Deb by the shoulders looked wildly into her eyes.

"Tell me, girl, tell me," she said, fiercely, "do you think it is possible to suffer as I do and live? What would you do if you loved Durant?"

Deb shook her off with a roughness which was unusual in her relations with Lady Fleming.

"If I thought he loved me I would follow him to the ends of the world, if I lost both earth and heaven," she said, with an intensity which though light in moral was deep in feeling.

"You! Have you, too, learnt the bitter lesson?"

"It matters little what I have learnt or who I've cared for—I am nothing but a street girl—but to think that you could marry the other when Mr. Durant was your lover beats me; and him so wild and distracted too."

"He never told me he loved me till long after I was a wife."

"Lor, I thought women had eyes. I'd have known if he loved me—as it is I know he don't. I don't pity *you*

much—you brought it on yourself, and must bear your punishment—but it is hard on him, though; he couldn't help it."

"Oh, Deb, don't be severe on me. If you only knew how very, very wretched I am!" And Cicely, her paroxysm of fever nearly over, began to cry.

"Don't cry, Lady Fleming," said Deb, who was touched by Cicely's tears, though her strongest sympathies were obviously with Mr. Durant; "don't cry—you'll wear yourself to your grave with all this fretting. I don't know what grand folk should do, therefore I am bad at giving advice; but if it's wicked to go with him as you love and stick to him, it must surely be wickeder to stop and fret because you mustn't go. Either be off and have done with it, says I, or stick to your husband and be cheery."

"I mean to try—oh, Deb, I mean to try; only it is very hard to find Mr. Durant gone without one word."

Ah, there was the sting. Cicely had made up her mind, nerved herself for a great scene, in which Harry Durant was to be heroically dismissed. In this she had been baulked, for he himself had cut the Gordian knot, and she felt disappointed and injured. He had taken the initiative instead of leaving it to her, and she was chafed and annoyed. Perhaps he knew the surest mode of curing her was to anger her against himself; or perhaps Lady Susan's more intimate knowledge of a woman's heart had prompted the step. Whatever the cause, he is gone, and Cicely must learn to reconcile herself to the fact as best she can. She does not seem to accept the position readily; for, totally deaf to every appeal Deb can make, she still sits weeping there, till the darkness has so increased that they can scarcely see each other through the gloom. It were well, perhaps, for tears to flow, since dangerous symptoms might have supervened on a state of protracted stormy grief.

"Sir Hubert is asking for her ladyship." And a

servant enters with a lamp as he makes the announcement. While the master is so ill it is no surprise to see Lady Fleming in tears. She jumps up, however, and seeks to hide her face as she goes quickly upstairs. Duty has called her, and she must obey. Harry Durant gone—Sir Hubert lying helpless and ill; there is no choice of paths left—she has but to go straight on and bear her burden with as little repining as possible. Poor Cicely! she flinches from the task and doubts her strength to walk heavily weighted along a stony road, yet she is not the first or only woman who has set out before on the same journey. Their number on earth is legion, but of this she knew and cared not, only nursed her own passionate longings as she went upstairs, leaving Deb to ponder over the theory of the thing with the crude philosophy which observance of outer signs and symptoms had given her. After Cicely left her she lapsed once more into the low, dirge-like, monotonous chant which had formed the accompaniment to her thoughts when they had been disturbed. Was it a requiem over her own buried hopes and fears, or over that tumultuous passion which had been raging of late—now, she hoped, about to be stilled and silenced for ever? Who shall know? But that Deb was learning rapidly the first great lessons which transform girlhood into womanhood—thoughtless trifling into sober reality—there is little doubt. Pray Heaven they may stand by her to advantage and strength when, plunged farther into the great world-fight, she finds herself beset with temptations and struggles.

CHAPTER XLII.

BREAKFAST TALK.

"FOR a man who has done nothing hitherto but prune his nails and twist his moustache I must say, Susan, your *protégé* is a better and altogether sharper specimen of Young England than I expected to see."

"Hurrah, Mr. Verulam! Then in future you will give me credit for acumen?"

"My dear Susan, whoever doubted that you possessed more than a woman's share? I certainly have never ventured to do so for a moment."

"And you will acknowledge, John, love, will you not, that I have never before interfered with your business concerns?"

"Yes, dear, yes."

"And I promise, *mon mari*, never to do so again, unless the exigencies are, as now, very pressing. Therefore you will give the matter practical consideration, will you not?"

"We'll see—we'll see, my dear Susan. Business affairs cannot be entered upon rashly, you know. In the meantime I wish your friends would come, for I have a vast amount of work to get through to-day, and little enough time to waste."

For Lady Susan it is an unusually early hour—9.30 A.M.—and she has made her toilette for the day, and is already expecting guests to breakfast. Only on rare occasions like the present does she condescend to appear at her husband's matutinal meal, which he, as a rule, eats in solitude at a very few minutes after eight, reading the morning paper the while. It must, then, be some very extraordinary occurrence which has so thoroughly convulsed the habits

of both husband and wife as to bring them together at this repast. A ring at the outer bell, and the announcement of Mr. Durant and Mr. Duncombe, explains who the visitors are who have had the power to upset the Verulams' usual domestic arrangements. Durant looks haggard and worried as he shakes hands cordially with Lady Susan; streaks of grey are becoming apparent on his beard. Time, which for years had passed him by as though it had forgotten him, seems all on a sudden to have bethought itself of his existence. He has visited the Campden Hill villa no more since he almost played false to Cicely by leaving without bidding her good-bye. Each day, however, he has received bulletins from Lady Susan of how matters are progressing there, and has learnt that Sir Hubert is struggling back to convalescence, and may, the doctors say, live on for years in a state of crippled invalidism, to which it will take all his young wife's care to minister, while an unparalleled amount of patient kindness alone can allay the constant irritability feebleness and illness engender. On this especial morning, however, Cicely's name is not mentioned; the interests of the little party are obviously centred on Algy Duncombe, to whom Lady Susan has of late thought fit to extend a kindly and helpful hand. Algy, quite at his ease—when was he ever known to be shy and abashed?—is talking to the great City merchant, managing to interlard his lively remarks with much practical good sense. Mr. Verulam is evidently inclined to take the young fellow on something more than mere trust at his wife's word, and, from his own observance and sharp insight into character, to believe in him, and to give him that help on in life which is necessary to every one of us sooner or later in our career, but of which Algy's own father refused to see the necessity. Seemingly engrossed though Algy is in conversation with the master of the house, his eyes every now and then travel to Harry Durant's face, as though finding an expression there which perplexes while it does not altogether please

him. Harry Durant has grown very silent of late, and on this present occasion he seems even less inclined than usual to be talkative; while the deeply furrowed lines on his brow tell that the thoughts and memories which are his constant companions are no pleasing or welcome guests. Lady Susan, interested though she is in the advancement of her new *protégé*, yet bestows only half her attention on what her husband is saying, for she, too, notes the storm-signs in Durant's mien.

"Into the City with me at once. Never delay till to-morrow what you can do to-day—that is it, my dear Mr. Duncombe." And Lady Susan's husband pats the young man on the back as he rises from the table—he would not for the world have used the flippant and familiar short name of Algy.

"To be seized by the collar and carried forthwith to the East—by Jove, but it is out of one's geography altogether. Shall I ever come back—will you guarantee that I shall?" he says, in his laughing way, as he bids Lady Susan good-bye before following Mr. Verulam into the hall.

"Yes, of course, with your pockets full of gold, to find May smiling on the threshold of a new home. There, go along; be a good boy and behave well."

He kisses the hand which has directed this change in his fortunes, and in another moment is walking briskly down the street with the head partner of the well-known firm of Verulam and Co.

"I hope the smell of hides will be as pleasing to May as it is to me," says Lady Susan, smiling, as she watches them pass the window. "If she resembles her mother she will cut Algy at once, when she hears he has gone into the tanning line. If she does, so much the better—he will be well rid of her. I wonder what makes me interest myself in his love affairs with a Bertrand?"

"May is too simple-minded and ingenuous to let any

such nonsense stand between her and the man she loves," answers Durant, soberly.

"Ah, forgive me, I did not remember at the moment that they are your relations—my intense dislike to Mrs. Bertrand made me speak more plainly than I should have done."

"In hatred of Mrs. Bertrand I defy myself to be beaten; so don't apologise, I beg. But the girls, thank Heaven, have been spared some of their mother's miserable and detestable attributes."

"It is well. But now to other matters. What has happened?" And Lady Susan turned round and looked at him sharply.

"Nothing especially. Don't question me, please, Lady Susan. A man cannot be always equally minded. It requires spiritual life to withstand temptation, and it does not continually exist in the same fulness."

"This is bad—very bad," she answered, thoughtfully. "But what has occurred to produce this fresh phase?"

"For mere mental depression is it easy to account? You as a woman, Lady Susan, must know well what it is to have days of high spirits and days of abject melancholy."

"Not a bit of it; I never was low-spirited in my life without a reason. I don't believe in it in the very least, and I insist on knowing what it is that has so thoroughly upset your equilibrium."

Harry Durant gave her no immediate answer, but walked away from the window where they had been standing and looked moodily into the fire for some moments, while Lady Susan watched him till, feminine impatience or anxiety getting the better of her, she exclaimed—

"For goodness' sake, speak—say something. You make me so nervous I feel quite ill. Cicely has not left her home again, or committed any fresh folly, has she?"

"Oh, no, nothing of that sort. I have not *seen* Lady Fleming for some weeks."

"But you have had a letter from her?"

"This morning—yes."

"Now, this is past all permission—really I thought Cicely had more sense."

"Stay, my dear Lady Susan; pray do not be hasty in your decision. She wrote at Fleming's dictation—signed the letter in his name."

"Then Fleming is a fool," was the decided little woman's rapid exclamation.

Durant could not forego a smile.

"Business necessitated a communication—business, too, which is both pressing and annoying."

"You have no right to be mixed up with Hubert's business matters; he must find some one else to act for him. I cannot think how he can be so selfish and unjust. You have played a trump card and won the game for him, which few men besides yourself would have done, and he ought to be grateful for the rest of his life, and not risk a second occasion, when you might not feel so generous."

"Pray spare me, Lady Susan; I feel anything but generous, I assure you; and as soon as I can see these money affairs of Fleming's put on a satisfactory footing there will be a vast expanse of continent stretched between me and temptation."

"Well resolved; but tell me, Mr. Durant, why should you be forced to meddle with his money affairs?"

"Because no man but myself can do what is necessary, for no one but myself understands them as I do."

"Pooh, nonsense; John was telling me about it yesterday—some rascally co-trustee has appropriated the settlement money belonging to his first wife's nieces; and as he is a bankrupt, with assets *nil*, that silly old Hubert has to make it good. There, you see, I know quite as much about it as you do."

"You have a broad and general outline of the facts, Lady Susan; but I am afraid the whole thing cannot be

disposed of in that slap-dash style. By dint of a little diplomacy we may be able to prove that Fleming is not so heavily involved in the matter as he now appears."

"How so? John told me he had not a loophole by which to escape. He will have to pay at least £30,000; and, as he is not a rich man, he will have to reduce their expenditure immensely."

"There may be such a thing as a compromise," said Durant, quietly. "So much money down, to save a lawsuit. That is what we propose."

Lady Susan looked at him keenly.

"I am a woman and don't know much, I dare say you think; but remember I am the wife of a business man, and consequently know enough to be fully aware that people are not likely to accept a compromise when the entire sum is a legal certainty. There is something behind this, Mr. Durant."

"A good deal of diplomacy and a certain amount of law—I told you so just now." And he smiled.

"A pity you did not enter the latter profession yourself, for you seem an adept in the art of shuffling. Tell me at once who is going to arrange this so-called compromise."

"Your humble servant, to the best of his power; and then, ho for the land of poetry and painting!"

"Which means, I presume, that having bared yourself voluntarily of all the luxuries of life, you are going to Italy to work for your living?"

"Lady Susan!"

"Oh, don't look so surprised and angry. With all my heart I commend your behaviour as regards Lady Fleming—that is only what a noble-minded, honourable man should have done. But I cannot see that you are at all bound to give up money for the arranging of Hubert's pecuniary embarrassments as well as sacrificing your feelings for the sake of his connubial bliss."

"Would to Heaven that the second sacrifice you mention

were the lesser. When life has become a blank, of what use is gold ? ”

“ My dear Mr. Durant, this is mere sentiment. Believe me, luxury and abundance are wonderful aids in helping us to overcome even the worst miseries.”

“ And you would advise me to live like a prince in some Italian *palazzo*, while Cicely, through my fault, is reduced to penury ? ”

“ Through your fault—is the man mad ?—what are you talking about ? You did not advise Hubert’s co-trustee to go to the bad, did you ? ”

“ Certainly not. I had nothing to do with that especial business ; but had I not in my weakness listened to Margaret’s—Mrs. Fitzalan’s—plausible pleading to be saved from exposure, Fitzalan’s daughter would have had her own money, and much of this misery might have been spared.”

Lady Susan began to laugh.

“ Commend me to a man in a sentimental mood for finding scruples. So this is, I suppose, what you call having a nice sense of honour ? ”

“ Lady Susan, I beg of you be lenient. If you only knew how this tone of raillery jars—— ”

She put her hand upon his arm.

“ My dear friend, I have only your welfare at heart—of that I hope you are fully aware. If giving up your whole fortune—even reducing yourself to rags and beggary—will in any way help you to endure steadfastly, I will not oppose you for a moment.”

“ Then you will help me, and keep my secret ? ”

She thought for a few seconds ; then she said—

“ Yes, I promise ; for perhaps my influence may prevent you from perpetrating more folly than is absolutely necessary.”

So it came about that a fresh compact was sealed between Harry Durant and Lady Susan Verulam, in which the former

explained how he intended £10,000 to be transferred from his purse to Fleming's, and how he looked to her kindness and womanly tact to help him delude his sick friend into the belief that the clever management of his affairs had effected this, while not the vaguest suspicion as to Durant's personal share in the matter should ever reach him. Various futile attempts had been made to make M. Barbier disgorge the funds with which he had decamped, and numerous had been the interviews on the subject between Durant and the French *commis* who had dined with Mrs. Fitzalan on the evening she started for Paris; but the difficulties in finding and then prosecuting him were so great, the amount which would ultimately be obtained from the wreck so small, that Durant decided to take no steps in the matter, but let M. Barbier work out his own punishment, as Margaret Denham had already done. That all this poverty and worry should come to Cicely through his mismanagement was the one thought which haunted him night and day, and was, perhaps, helping more to whiten his hair and furrow his brow than the unhappy passion which, like a threatening storm-cloud, was to divide him from her sweet companionship for ever. Ay, if he had strength to resist to the end the yearning which was ever impelling him to go just once more to the Campden Hill villa for that last farewell which he had denied himself so manfully and regretted so continually! Pray Heaven there may be no more freaks of chance to bring these two together ere a wall has been built up between them with sufficient firmness to withstand a fierce and passionate attempt at an overthrow.

Lady Susan perhaps thought this privately, though she would not for worlds have given her fears verbal expression; but she watched Durant's face narrowly as they talked together, and entered with more alacrity into this money-giving project than she would have done had she not felt sure that a sacrifice made "for Cicely's sake" was

the most practical means by which he could help himself. In nursing reflection that he had done all he could for her, might he not in time arrive at a state of contentment and resignation?

"Come and dine, and hear how Algy has been getting on in the City," she said, as, after a good hour's talk, they shook hands.

"Thanks, yes, I will. I had almost forgotten all about Algy and his new career. How selfish one becomes when absorbed in personal worries!"

"Not your besetting sin as a rule, and we will chaff you out of it before we have done," she answered, laughing; but a soberer expression came over her face when he had left her.

"There is a noble life marred," she murmured to herself. "How strange it is that the devil, in the form of wicked people, has so much power to interfere with the good ones! I wonder how it is?" With which subtle question Lady Susan went upstairs to busy herself over her numerous morning duties, in which various little kindnesses to many members of the help-wanting community took no inconspicuous part. "Fast," "blunt," and "slap-dash" were the adjectives by which society described Lady Susan; but, though quite aware of this, she heeded them but little, and went on her own progressive way, helping the harvest here, pulling up the tares there, giving good advice after her cheery, chaffy fashion everywhere, till many a one who had condemned her, as Algy had done, when a mere acquaintance, was forced to acknowledge that to find one friend on earth such as Lady Susan could prove herself to be, were worth enduring all the misfortunes and annoyances which had caused her staunch loyalty to reveal itself.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WORD FENCING.

CHRISTMAS festivities are the sole topic of conversation at Swinton Hall. For three winters the family has been absent, and, to judge from the amount of preparation that is being made, it is obviously intended that all the revels which were omitted during their sojourn abroad should be crowded into the coming season; and fervently does every one hope—both in and out of the house—that no tiresome individual will be taken ill at an inauspicious moment to spoil these gaieties, as Sir Hubert Fleming's indisposition had interrupted the September shooting parties. May, in the most coquettish of hats, looks the type of a happy simple-minded Saxon maiden, as she stands at the garden-door, twisting bits of pink paper into artificial roses, and giving orders to the gardener meanwhile on the subject of the evergreens that will be required to make arches and bowers in the ballroom, and among the branches of which the paper roses are intended to peep and play at being real with the impertinence of most of the artificial fallacies of life.

May, usually inanimate and bored, has grown quite brisk and gay, eclipsing even the more energetic Rose in the unceasing restlessness with which she looks after every little detail herself, and suggests perpetually new and troublesome improvements.

Can it be possible that the result of the breakfast talk at Lady Susan Verulam's is in any way influencing May, or that she has condescended to tolerate the smell of hides? Just so; she concurs in Lady Susan's view of the case—that they will in nowise interfere with the glitter of her

diamonds, should Algy be ever rich enough to buy any. The squire had kissed his daughter and congratulated her heartily—be it remembered he had always a kindly feeling for Algy—while Mrs. Bertrand—well, she consented to suffer the affair with as much grace as she could possibly command.

“It was a bad marriage—a very bad marriage for May; but she was such a silly girl there was no making her understand her own worth or value. All she hoped was that Rose would have more sense. Mr. Seton was a baronet’s son—the eldest, of course—and he was coming for Christmas.”

Of the post-obits and kites and sundry pieces of paper, with “R. Seton” attached to them, which were flying about London in dozens, Mrs. Bertrand, luckily for her peace of mind, knew nothing; nor how the gentleman in question had for some time past looked on Rose’s fortune as a stop-gap for a while, till his father’s death should free him from some of his pressing liabilities.

“Oh, what a peevish fool was he of Crete,
Who taught his son the office of a fowl!
And yet, with all his care, the fool was drowned.”

Mrs. Bertrand, from excess of zeal, was about to plunge her dear Rose into the very marshy ground to avoid which all her maternal care had been for years watchfully eager.

“Of course, if there were any chance of Harry the case would be different; and who knows?—hearts are sometimes caught at the rebound. It is useless to tell her he was not in love with Cicely, for she will not believe it. She has asked him for Christmas—naturally all relations should meet together when it is possible at that season, and Harry’s only home is with them.”

Will he come? is the question which is rather exercising her mind, for as yet no answer has been sent to her very pressing and cordial invitation.

May is still at the garden-door when she hears her mother's voice speaking behind her—

"Thwarted—I am destined to be always thwarted. That odious Harry is not coming after all."

"I am very sorry, but why not, mamma? Cousin Harry is always so nice and good and kind—I like him to come to Swinton."

"Nice and good and kind! Rubbish, May; you should not be so missish now you are soon to become a married woman. Cousin Harry is bearish and intolerable, and that you will learn before you are much older."

"Oh, mamma, what has he done?"

"Done! Committed endless follies, of which perhaps Algy will tell you some day. For my part, I can't make out why men want to behave in such an immoral manner. He had much better marry Rose and settle down."

"Oh, mamma, what can you mean?"

"Nothing, child—my righteous indignation has carried me too far; but as you will soon be married it does not matter so much. Only don't say anything to Rose."

"There is nothing to say, for you have not told me anything. Why is cousin Harry not coming to Swinton?"

"Because he is going abroad for an indefinite period, which means that he is going to live with all those horrid low artists over in Italy; and if ever he does marry I suppose it will be a model."

"Some of the models we used to see going in and out of the studios in Rome were very pretty," remarked May, arranging her paper rose as she spoke.

"Don't talk of what you know nothing about, child," said her mother, angrily. "Pretty, indeed! I dare say they are. As if prettiness were everthing! I suppose men call Cicely pretty."

"Oh, mamma, so she is—pretty, and good too. I quite love Cicely, and Algy says he is so glad, for she is the dearest little woman he knows."

"Algy is a bigger fool than I ever gave him credit for if he encourages you in any intimacy with her—especially as I believe he knows all about her."

"She is his adopted sister, and she is going to be my sister too," said May, simply.

"Adopted fiddlesticks! I don't believe in such silly sentimentality; it is only another name for flirting."

"Oh, mamma!"

"Well, never mind—if you like it, it is no business of mine. You insist on marrying Algy, so you must just make the best you can of your life with him. For my part I wish it was all over. The worst of the whole concern is being compelled to invite that odious Lady Susan Verulam—her voice will make itself heard in every corner of the house, pulling people up in that blunt, offhand way she has."

"Dear Lady Susan—she has been so kind to Algy. I will entertain her. I am sorry you do not like her, mamma."

Mrs. Bertrand looked at her daughter for a minute, and then she said, musingly—

"It is very odd; one would scarcely believe you were my child, May. You have not got a scrap of spirit and determination about you."

Materfamilias was right: it was strange—a natural anomaly, perhaps; only, taking into consideration the squire's calm benevolent attributes, it had its explanation on the other side. And May was about to reap a reward for her gentle endurance and patient love in marrying as good a fellow as ever breathed—violent though her mother's diatribes ever were against "that brainless, low-bred, impecunious Algy." As soon as Christmas was over the marriage was to take place; not that as yet Algy's newly-acquired position in Mr. Verulam's office brought grist to the mill, but the squire, pleased with "the boy's desire to work his way in life for himself," had made a

good provision for his daughter. So the young people had determined to begin their joint career on slender means, and help each other in the attainment of fortune. Surely they must succeed, with Lady Susan as a powerful coadjutrix. Whatever Mrs. Bertrand might say in disparagement, she had elected herself their firm friend, and was likely to prove their wisest and kindest counsellor.

It was a disappointment to both Algy and May that Harry Durant was not to be present at their marriage; but Algy knew full well how painful Swinton memories must be to him, and could not urge the probing of an unhealed wound by inducing him to come to the old place again so soon; and May wondered silently what it all meant, and why cousin Harry had grown so grey and quiet on a sudden—for she could not do otherwise than remark the change on the one only occasion since September, when he came to see her in London during the purchase of her *trousseau*, and had brought her a set of lovely pink coral, which he had ordered in Naples, especially for the young bride.

The guests had all arrived at Swinton, and this time there were no *contretemps* in the form of illnesses. Little jars of necessity occurred. What country-house assemblage, however well-bred the people may be, has ever been selected with sufficient care to avoid those moments of internal convulsion which everybody feels, though the prescribed laws of conventionality prevent the sensation from rising to the surface? Mrs. Bertrand could scarcely be called clever at amalgamations; she invariably invited her guests for their social standing—"position and wealth" were the only distinguishing marks for which she sought; the more agreeable characteristics of "brain or beauty" she passed unheeded. The collection of inmates at Swinton Hall was thus not unfrequently incongruous; each individual was ticketed with a high-sounding, well-known name, but sympathy in feelings and habits was as a rule entirely un-

known. On the occasion of her daughter's marriage the idea had seized Mrs. Bertrand "to swamp the commercial Duncombes" by exhibiting all the aristocracy of which her visiting list was capable, and had it not been for the much-contemned Lady Susan Verulam, who, as the wife of a City man, stood with much tact on the confines of the two kingdoms, Mrs. Bertrand's Christmas and marriage festivities might have ended in a revolution which her home rule would have failed to subdue. Not that she thanked Lady Susan for her influence and interference; on the contrary, she hated her more and more each time that she could not help seeing how but for her, unpleasant difficulties would have arisen on all sides. The squire had especially charged her to make no mention of Cicely's name, or allude, however distantly, to the fact of his nephew's absence in the presence of guests. He felt he could not trust his wife's tongue, and nothing would have rendered the good squire more unhappy than the thought that scandal on this subject should emanate from his house, especially, too, as he felt he was far better informed about what had happened of late than was Mrs. Bertrand. With an unusual amount of obedience she heeded his wishes until the marriage was over, the young people had departed, and several of her very aristocratic acquaintances had also passed on to join another gathering in another country house. Mrs. Bertrand breathed more freely than she had done for days in the atmosphere so heavily laden with importance in which she had been living of late. With the sense of relief from oppression came a desire for gossip, and a sudden wish to pick Lady Susan's brains on the subject of the little drama, one act of which had been played at Swinton, seized her with a longing she did not attempt to resist.

"Poor dear Lady Fleming, I am so glad she is better," she observed as she and Lady Susan were seated side by side in the drawing-room after dinner one evening. "She

sent May that sweet little china flower-stand—you saw it, of course—Cicely was always fond of the girls.”

Lady Susan looked at her hostess in some surprise, but she failed to discover her intention in thus addressing her; so she merely said, quietly—

“Yes, my cousin’s wife is a great friend of mine.”

“Ah, I know you always liked her even before—and you are generous and devote yourself to her now.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” observed Lady Sue, looking the picture of innocent perplexity. “Why should I not devote myself to her? Oh, because Hubert is ill, and the house sorrowful and dull. I hope I am not worldly enough to make that a reason for absenting myself.”

“Pray don’t think it necessary to be on your guard with me,” continued Mrs. Bertrand, pointedly. “I am quite as well informed on the subject of her uncomfortable preference for our nephew Harry as you are, but I hope it will die out. It would have been too annoying for us all.”

“Had she a preference for Mr. Durant? Well, I am not surprised. He was very kind to her as a girl. She would have been very ungrateful if she had not liked him.”

“Do you think it was nothing more than that?” And Mrs. Bertrand lowered her voice to a whisper.

Lady Susan began to laugh in her noisy way.

“Really, Mrs. Bertrand, I thought you said you knew all about it. I suspect I am far more in Mr. Durant’s confidence than you are, and I can positively affirm that he simply took an interest in his old acquaintance, Mr. Fitzalan’s daughter, on account of that odious Margaret Denham’s abominable behaviour to her. Your worthy nephew was always the champion of distressed maidens; and if people have thought fit to chatter about his relations with Lady Fleming, it is simply because pure kindness is never understood by evilly-minded people.”

“You really believe all this nonsense, Lady Susan? I am surprised,”

"Who shall believe otherwise? What right have we to impute sinful motives to the actions of our fellow-men? I am very fond of Cicely, and most indignantly angry with the individual, whoever it may have been, who has thought fit to poison my cousin's mind by uttering base calumnies about his wife and Mr. Durant. If I only met that person, language would fail to express my contempt."

Lady Susan looked straight into Mrs. Bertrand's eyes; they fell beneath her gaze. Having roused the sleeping lioness, she was beginning to regret her temerity.

"I am so glad to receive such authentic assurances that all is well in that quarter," she said, in a subdued, low tone. "I have never ventured to speak on the subject to any one else; but you, I know, are a friend and can be trusted."

"Perhaps in future you will make it your business to contradict any reports that may reach you, Mrs. Bertrand. It surely would only be kind from the mother of two daughters, who might, you know, any day be attacked spitefully, as Cicely has been."

"Lady Susan!"

"Pardon me, but one never knows what malicious tongues, allowed to rage at will, may not effect. Rumour is already coupling Rose's name with that of Robert Seton."

"And why not, Lady Susan? Reports *never* get about without some foundation."

"Ah, it is true? Then reports contradict themselves, for gossiping tongues have said more than once that Mrs. Bertrand would not let her girls marry without money, and surely Robert Seton has got worse than nothing."

"His father is a baronet with large possessions."

"Very probably. Oh, I may be misinformed—as misinformed as you were about Cicely, you know. It is no business of mine, I can't think why I meddled. Yes, Mr. Burke, I am quite rested, thank you." And she turned suddenly away and plunged into a confidential conversation

with the vicar, who had just come in from the dining-room.

The following morning Lady Susan and Mrs. Bertrand bid each other farewell without any mutual regard or friendly liking having arisen from the meeting which had been forced on them by circumstances; on the contrary, there was in both their minds a determination to avoid as much as possible in the future every occasion in which they might be compelled to come in contact. That Lady Susan had got the best of it was wormwood to Mrs. Bertrand, especially as those innuendoes about Mr. Seton were growing rapidly with every hour into prejudices and objections. She must have his affairs inquired into at once—just what Lady Susan desired, for ready as she was at all times to further what she hoped would prove a felicitous union, yet in this instance she wished to save Rose at all hazards from a lifetime of misery with a *vaurien* as she knew Seton to be. She had a tender place in her heart for all young things, and liked the girl, though she drove down the Swinton avenue mentally resolving never to set her foot in that venomous Mrs. Bertrand's country quarters again.

CHAPTER XLIV.

AT NICE.

"FLEMING seems to have taken a fresh lease of life. He looks far happier, lying back in his invalid chair in the sunshine, than he ever did when he was walking about comparatively in health and strength."

"Why should he not?" answered Algy Duncombe, to whom this observation was addressed. "He lives in an atmosphere of youth and beauty—is it so very unlikely that he should be inspired by them?"

"Perhaps not. Lady Fleming certainly is very lovely. What spirits she has too! I wonder how she ever came to marry Sir Hubert?"

"Curious fool, be still,
Is human love the growth of human will?"

laughed gay Algy, who had lost none of his brightness, though he had assumed a less boyish manner after more than four years of matrimonial bliss. He and his companion, a man who had known Sir Hubert in years gone by, but had never seen Lady Fleming before, were standing on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, watching the perpetual to-and-fro of the representatives of many nations, when on a sudden they perceived Sir Hubert's chair in the distance, with Cicely by its side. Never even for an hour did she leave him. Vain were his suggestions that she should go into society—be happy, as befitted her age and position. "She was perfectly happy, and wanted nothing more," was the only answer he ever received; and he was forced not only to content himself with it, but to believe in it, for she was always cheerful and gay, yielding to his moods, interesting herself in his ailments, soothing his nervous fidgets—till truly it was not strange he had become a happier and brighter man under the influence of her sweet companionship. Algy Duncombe joined them in their morning walk, and smiled as he shook hands with his adopted sister.

"Of a truth the battle has been bravely fought—the victory triumphant," he thought to himself as he looked at her.

Perhaps she read in his eyes some portion of his thoughts, for she blushed and turned away.

Algy, absorbed in his work in the City, had not seen much of Cicely and Sir Hubert of late. Partly on account of reduced income, partly for health's sake, they resided chiefly abroad; thus the subject of the old love had never

been re-discussed by him and Lady Fleming. Since they had met once more in Nice no opportunity had offered; but without asking questions Algy had discovered from her look and manner that passion had given place to peace.

"I need not ask if life goes well with you, Cis—my sister," he said, as they dropped behind Sir Hubert's chair, leaving him to talk to the man who had been walking with Algy.

"Yes, I am very happy now—happier than I ever thought or deserved to be," she said, in a low tone. "Only——" And she stopped suddenly and looked at Algy.

"Well—speak, sister mine—what can I do for you?"

She turned away once more. "Have you ever heard of Mr. Durant—since——"

"Good gracious, Cicely! you surely do not mean to say you have never seen him nor heard of him all these years?"

"Only once, many months ago, Deb wrote me word that he was at Milan—that she saw him frequently. Since then I have heard naught of either of them. Do you think, Algy, that——"

"That Durant will marry Deb—is that what you mean? I answer emphatically—No."

"I thought he liked her—perhaps I hoped he would marry her," said Cicely, thoughtfully. "It was he who smoothed the way for her professional education and made the arrangements which enabled her to go to Italy to study. I don't know if you heard that he gave a munificent donation to that home or refuge so considerably started by an English lady in Milan for young artists studying music, in order that Deb might be admitted there as an inmate, and thus shielded from the temptations so rife in that unholy city. He would not let us help, though Sir Hubert offered."

"Of course I know all that, but it proves nothing. Durant would have done the same for a hundred others. It was a love of artistic development that prompted him, not individual sentiment. Deb is coming out in London next spring—it is expected that she will create a *furor*."

"I hope so," said Cicely, and she relapsed into thought. It was obvious she had not gained all the information she wanted from Algy, and that a certain amount of shy nervousness prevented her from asking straightforward questions. Perhaps he guessed that she was sufficiently interested in her old lover to be anxious for tidings.

"Durant is in Rome at present," he said. "He is painting there rather diligently, but I believe he means to return to Milan in the spring. May had a letter from him the other day, accompanied by a present for our small Harry, who is his god-child. He mentioned you and Fleming—said he had often heard of you from travellers who had met you at various times, and wondered whether it would ever be his luck to see you again."

"To meet Harry Durant again!" murmured Cicely. "Ah! that would be a happiness. But one must not look forward to it till the end comes."

"Lady Fleming, what a morose view! With this bright sunshine all around you, how can you say such gloomy things?"

"I do not feel gloomy," she answered, smiling. "I am perfectly contented and happy; and as for the end of this life, I look forward to it as a consummation of bliss."

Algy stared at her.

"Good gracious, how odd!" was the only reply he could command.

This calm announcement puzzled him. But then, be it remembered, Algy had always been a little bit addicted to heathenism, and even May had not altogether converted him. To few beings is sufficient grace given to look

calmly on death as a welcome release from the fret and worries which attend even the happiest life.

Algy regarded Cicely's words as showing that the outward sunshiny cheerfulness in which she basked was a delusion—that a dark night lay behind it, a night of gloom which the hottest midsummer rays would never penetrate. But in this he was mistaken. All was peace within—she had resigned her will freely and unconditionally, and in doing so life or death were alike acceptable—only after death she looked forward to a brighter, more glorious existence. In none of this could Algy have followed her feelings, even had she attempted to explain them; but Cicely had no such intention—she turned the conversation to topics more within the range of everyday talk, drew him on to speak of his child and his wife, listened to never-ending commendations of their mutual friend Lady Susan, and charmed him by the apparent interest she took in all his affairs—only in alluding to the recent death of her old friend at Swinton, Mr. Burke, she once more astonished Algy by her views and her expressed thankfulness that the struggle was over and the good pastor was at rest.

Strange that in all their talk over old times Mrs. Fitzalan's name was never mentioned. Did they both know something they did not care to reveal, or was it an ignorance they did not wish to enlighten, which made them both so silent on that subject?

Altogether it was a pleasant morning these two spent walking behind Sir Hubert's chair. Old memories had been awakened for Cicely, it is true, but perhaps the recollection was in itself a pleasure.

“’Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.”

says a favourite poet, and, thanks be to God, for her there was no remorse as she thought over old days.

She had dropped the thorn-covered branch as she toiled up the difficult hill which lay before her on life's highway, and the withered rose-leaves which were all she had retained, though they still bore a slight aroma, were powerless to prick or wound.

Of how Durant had fared on his life-journey no one knew.

"He can bear his griefs in silence
Who can moderate his joys."

That he had never married, Algy's talk with Cicely has already told, though the fault lay not at Mrs. Bertrand's door. On the hint given by Lady Susan the state of Mr. Seton's affairs had been investigated and Rose saved the misery of being linked for life to a worthless scapegrace; then followed fresh efforts on the part of that indefatigable match-maker, Mrs. Bertrand, for a desperate bid in the matrimonial market, and she positively persuaded the good-natured squire that another trip abroad was necessary to recruit "poor Rose's spirits after her late disappointment," the real object being that she wished to make one more attempt at converting Harry Durant into a Benedick. Utterly fruitless, however, was all her scheming. Rose, as she grew older, became more sensible of her mother's plans, more annoyed and angry at the uncomfortable position in which they not unfrequently placed her, and to cousin Harry himself she confided her wish to leave the paternal roof, and in a garb of mercy pass her life in ministering to the wants and necessities of her poorer brethren, thus seeking to forget, if possible, the wiles and tricks and chicaneries which had so utterly disgusted her with the sphere in which she had hitherto moved.

As many another had done before her, Mrs. Bertrand had overshot her mark, and brought about the very contrary result to that for which she had so earnestly striven.

She raved and stormed and raged when Harry Durant,

by Rose's request, made her wishes known to her parents, but the squire's regrets were the deepest. Though he gave a reluctant consent to thus parting with his child, yet he did not attempt to withhold it, for he full well knew that Rose, at home and unmarried, would lead a life of constant upbraiding and ceaseless worry. She had chosen her path in life, and far was it from the squire's intentions to cast his feelings or prejudices as stumbling-blocks in her way.

So in the merry sunshine, wandering among the fashionable frequenters of the southern watering-place, Algy and Cicely talked over all these family histories, till the old days which had almost faded away in the mists of the distant past seemed to stand forth once more out of the shadows which had surrounded them, as though glorified and brightened by the purer, more tempered state of feeling into which the chief actors in life's drama had merged.

CHAPTER XLV

THE SIÈCLE D'OR.

A SHOWY-LOOKING, busy restaurant, on the Boulevard Haussmann. A brisk trade is going on; the hot summer's day is on the wane, and the numerous little marble-topped tables ranged outside on the boulevard are crowded with *convives*, principally of the lower classes, sipping their *bière de Bavière* or their *sirop de groseille*, and enjoying themselves in a fashion of which the French have alone the secret. Inside the house, on the first floor, dinners at two francs fifty centimes are being served by untidy-looking *garçons*; and, to judge from the crowded state of the room, it is obvious that the establishment is renowned. There is

the usual buffet at one end of the *salle*, with its fruit and *suceries* artistically displayed; behind it, dressed tastefully to correspond with the surroundings among which she is placed, sits the mistress of this flourishing concern—an old acquaintance in a new character, scarcely recognizable, perhaps, to those who had not been of her intimates, and of these she scarcely expected to see many among the people who flocked round her in her present life. Yet for all that she had not wholly escaped recognition, nor failed to produce the proverbial nine days' talk when it became whispered through fashionable Paris that Mrs. Fitzalan, society's idol in the Champs Elysées, was keeping a low restaurant on the Boulevard Haussmann.

"*Quelle chute*," the Frenchmen said, with a shrug; "but, *Dieu!* I always thought she was *de la canaille*." And some few of them, with impertinent curiosity, went to look at her in her new position, as though she were the woman with two heads or any other odd or end which freakish Nature has produced and the showman hawks for profit. But they were right in their comments, Mrs. Fitzalan had sprung *de la canaille*. Thus, she had no false pride or shame, but accepted her new position with the same dignified grace with which she had held the old one. The curious world was disappointed—Madame Alan showed no outward signs of regret over her return to the rung from which she had started up the social ladder. On the contrary, she laughed and joked and exchanged badinage with those who came to pay for their dinners across the counter; gave *petits verres* of rare cognac to her old associates when they honoured her with a visit, and altogether let herself go with an *abandon* which would have been totally unfitting the widow of the Champs Elysées.

"Thank Heaven the women will not look me up here," was her constant consolation; "and as for the men, the more old friends the merrier. They are *bonne clientèle*

—bring grist to the mill, and help to make life go briskly.”

Hence it may be inferred that Margaret Denham had in no whit changed since she left London to make the best terms she could with fortune in Paris. She might, if she had been minded, as far as money went, have hung on a while longer by the skirts of society, for Peter's hoard, forwarded to her in the tin box by Mr. Burke, would have propped her up for a while. But Margaret, for a woman, was a fair financier; she went carefully into the interest and compound interest question, and decided that her little capital, invested in a thriving trade, was more to the purpose than an uncertain throw for her old place. “Black was sure to turn up when she staked on red, especially with Algy Duncombe for an antagonist;” so she threw down the cards which had brought her neither luck nor pleasure, and with a freshly-assorted pack began another game on different principles. For five years now she had been speculating commercially, and has already doubled, nay, quadrupled Peter's savings; the excitement of acquiring wealth absorbs her time and thoughts; and, as far as a woman possessed of Margaret Denham's deep-rooted passions and insatiable restlessness can be content, she seems so. The life of constant action employs her, if it does not wholly fill up the void the past has made. To hers, in common with many a young career, the first false step at starting is an everlasting bane—that one false step, as she herself had said, which can never be regained—by a woman.

So the weeks and months sped on, and in the fashionable quarter Mrs. Fitzalan's name had been forgotten, or, if ever mentioned, it was only as that of “a woman who took us all in, you know; but, thank goodness, has gone back to the slums from whence she came, or is, perhaps, dead by this time, for aught we can tell.”

Yet very substantially in the flesh she works steadily

on, more *au courant* with the affairs of society than society is with her, hearing bits of fashionable gossip across her well-stocked buffet, and not unfrequently giving back-handed slaps to those against whom she has a grudge, by retailing these same bits of gossip to the very individuals with whom she is aware it will accomplish the swiftest amount of mischief. Ah! if the great ladies only guessed how those without the pale often work a misery and a downfall, they would not lounge so carelessly in their dainty drawing-rooms, and contemn with sneers that lower class in which they innocently fancy they have no part.

Yes, Margaret Denham was unchanged. Contradiction and disappointment had not yet worked her *salut*; the issues for which she was striving were still the same, only she had pitched her tent on a lower level; but the end had not yet come!

Cicely and Sir Hubert had passed through Paris on their way to the south—this by one of her numerous agents she had discovered—but what mattered it to her, so that the baronet had not died to give place to that other love? She cared not how slight was the feeble thread which held him yet to life so long as he still lingered on—a barrier between those two sundered hearts.

The warm summer's day has been a busy one, for the temperature has made men thirsty, and the gay sunshine has brought many loiterers to regale themselves at the *Siècle d'Or*, as Margaret's restaurant is called. Still, though at every instant money finds its way to the *comptoir*, there are deep lines on the so-called *Veuve Alan's* brow. Something has gone wrong—something of which she does not choose to prate, though it gives a degree of acrimony to her tone in addressing not only her dependants, but those from whom her influx of wealth is derived. Now and anon she glances anxiously to the door by which many comers enter, as she had done once before on another important occasion of her life. But none come and go save those

belonging to a different class from the men and women among whom her career was then cast.

Of Bohemians and artisans, with *grisettes* or shabby-genteel companions, there is a plentiful supply, intermingled with just a sprinkling of priests and dandies; but no one enters who could, beyond their monetary value, be of any real interest to Mrs. Fitzalan.

Ah! the colour mounts and falls suspiciously. An oldish man and a young girl have seated themselves at a table by an open window and asked for the *carte*—old Wurzel, the Meister at the Art School, and Deb. Have they come with an intention, or has mere chance brought them? Whichever it may be, that they have not been unexpected by Mrs. Fitzalan is very obvious. Their arrival in Paris is, as are most things, known to her at once—she obtains police reports at will within the city precincts; but, alas for her! beyond these limits she has no sway. Have the ageing lines about her face been produced by wearing, longing for information anent that other life for more than five years past so thoroughly and completely thrust out of her own?

Will Deb know aught? Ay, Deb has tracked her to the *Siècle d'Or*, and even as she sits now by old Wurzel's side is taking observation of her who bears but little resemblance to the Grey Widow of bygone memories. But then, on the other hand, in the elegant, graceful young *prima donna* returning from foreign lands to seek the smiles and favour of an English audience, save for old Wurzel's companionship, Mrs. Fitzalan would have failed to recognize Deb the street-girl. Time has set its mark on both—while the cup of wine the girl holds is foaming with light froth, the elder woman's goblet of champagne is still and flat. Deb rises at last, and making a sign to the old man to remain in his place, goes forward to the buffet. Madame Alan trembles almost perceptibly. Yet wherefore? She is a believer in fate, be it remembered. This is the

first woman out of the old life who has intruded on the new one. Her presence there augurs no good, she feels assured, and she cannot shake off the presentiment of a coming evil which will hang about her like a waking dream.

"Madame Alan, do you know me?" asks Deb, in English—a language heard but seldom in the *Siècle d'Or*, where foreigners are rarely seen.

"Yes, you are Deb. I recognized him," pointing to old Wurzel. "You are changed." The tones were hurried, though there was a strong effort to render them cold and distant.

"I have something to say to you—shall we go into a private room?"

"I am very busy; will it not keep?" was the answer, ungraciously given.

"If you will, it shall be kept for ever." And Deb moved off.

"Best do a disagreeable thing at once and have done with it. Come, girl." And Mrs. Fitzalan led the way through a small door at the back of the *comptoir*.

Even during these few words another change of places was apparent—the girl had become refined and softened by education and discipline, the woman brutalized and hardened by friction and wear. The room into which she led Deb was small and simply furnished. The days were long since passed when Margaret Denham bestowed a thought on outward appearance. She pushed a chair towards her visitor, but Deb bowed a refusal.

"He bade me find you and give you this," she said, holding a small packet to Mrs. Fitzalan.

She opened it with an impetuosity which nearly took Deb's breath away, it came with such a rush.

"Harry Durant!" she cried. "Why has he sent me this? I gave him this ring in the days when I believed he loved me. Why does he send it back now after so

long? Tell me, girl, since you alone seem to know his secrets."

"Because he thought as you looked at it a pledge of the old love might awaken tender memories, and help you to be good and just and true."

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed wildly.

"And he sends you as a messenger to mock me. Are you his new love, perchance? Tell Harry Durant, if he has aught to say to me, from his own lips only will I hear it." And the metallic tones rang through the room.

"They are sealed for ever—he is dead!" was the answer, in an awed whisper; and a silence as of the grave prevailed.

"Dead! Harry Durant is dead!" The words came out at last with a cry, and Mrs. Fitzalan, for the first time before any living witness, burst into convulsive sobbing, and threw herself as though utterly crushed on a small couch. Deb watched her till the first wild outburst should be past, nor in fact spoke till she was again addressed. She had no pitying nook in her heart for Mrs. Fitzalan, whom she spurned and loathed. Only to carry out Durant's dying wishes was she here to-day.

At last the tempest raged itself into a lull, and, looking up at the girl with pleading in her eyes, she asked—

"The manner of his death—tell me all the truth, and quickly?"

"He died of fever, at Milan, three weeks ago."

"Were you his nurse?"

"I was present when he died, but not alone; Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming had been sent for."

A piercing shriek that must have reached even the *convives* in the crowded dining *salle* rang through the air, and Mrs. Fitzalan lay prostrate at Deb's feet.

That he was dead was an agony that years would never soften—that Heaven had allowed Cicely to receive his latest breath was a madness and a torture before which every

other thought in life must bow. Yet so it had been—Harry Durant's spirit had passed away while those he loved hovered about his bed; and as Cicely imprinted a lingering kiss on the death-stricken brow it was as though peace came to the soul about to enter on its eternal rest. And she was calm and placid, though regretful and sad, over the death of the old friend whom for the last five years during his wandering she had never seen; but in Mrs. Fitzalan's breast the passion which had never slumbered amid all the conflicts of a tumultuous life received its death-blow with this intelligence. Restored to consciousness by Deb's ministrations she sat and looked blankly round, as though her mind refused to recognize earthly objects, but was peering into futurity in search of him who had passed away. That ring which he had sent her had been put on her finger by Deb during her unconsciousness. She gazed on it as though it were all a dream, and listened as one in a vision while Deb repeated the dying words which had accompanied it, and which bade her seek beyond the mummeries and farcical imbroglios of the world for that "peace passing all human understanding" which during her earthly career she had so utterly failed to discover.

* * * * *

Weeks have grown into months, and the *Siecle d'Or* is worked by other hands. Up a side-street, *au quatrieme*, the quondam Madame Alan dwells—a mournful expiatory existence, with no visitors, no friends from the old past, save Deb, who in her not infrequent professional visits to the French capital never fails to go on an errand of mercy to that unhappy abode. But even Deb's presence, linked though her name is with so many old memories, fails to awaken a feeling of either joy or sorrow in Margaret Denham's heart—her senses are stunned, blunted by what she calls "the perpetual adverse fortune" which has pursued her, and in turning away from the dice on the

throw of which she has so often staked her earthly well-being, she stands alone in the world. Neither asking from nor giving love to her fellows, but aloof from every sentiment of sympathy and pity, she awaits the end which perchance in the long hours of thought and doubting fear which have overtaken her of late she is learning to dread all too sincerely.

THE END.



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